

Final Report

LPT-214-03 “Integration of Watershed Management Issues in a Comprehensive Community Plan: The Long Lake Watershed 2002-2004”

Introduction

This project was designed to create a holistic watershed management plan for the Long Lake watershed in Washburn County. The need for the project was born out of local concerns with development pressures in the watershed. Additionally, the Long Lake Preservation Association (LLPA) sought to reconcile and integrate numerous studies and reports on the lake and watershed. The LLPA intended for the watershed planning process to create a forum for numerous stakeholders and experts to discuss watershed problems and respective solutions and strategies. Finally, the LLPA wanted to ensure that the local comprehensive planning efforts underway in the watershed reflected lake and watershed issues and incorporated appropriate strategies for addressing development concerns.

The University of Wisconsin Stevens Point (UWSP) collaborated with the LLPA to develop a grant proposal and planning strategy to meet these goals. UWSP formed a project team and hired a part-time local project coordinator (Eric Olson) as well as a part-time graduate assistant (Jason Folstad). UWSP staff and the LLPA collaboratively worked with the Northwest Regional Planning Commission, the Washburn County government, local (town) governments, and other state and federal stakeholders. The results of the two year project are:

- A State of the Watershed Report summarizing watershed conditions and listing detailed actions that can and should be taken to protect water quality and ecology for the long-term;
- A survey of watershed residents eliciting their views on local planning, protection, and development concerns;
- Three locally developed town comprehensive plans for the towns in the watershed that reflect the need to manage new development for the good of the environment and existing residents and a county-wide comprehensive plan;
- A prioritized action plan for the LLPA to work from when developing their own annual plans and budgets;
- An implementation plan and grant-funded project developed by the UWSP staff and the LLPA to begin implementing high priority projects.
- Explanations and examples of watershed protection strategies that local governments can employ as well a detailed look at land division ordinances for town-based watershed protection.

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In addition to these tangible results are numerous intangible but substantive developments in the awareness of watershed issues and commitment to watershed protection. This includes strengthened partnerships between the LLPA and other local and regional actors (UW Extension, Washburn County Lakes and Rivers Association, Wisconsin DNR, Washburn County government agencies, Friends of Hunt Hill Audubon Sanctuary). This also includes a higher level of organization and capacity within the LLPA itself, as members and leaders of the association develop their ability to plan and implement programs and policies.

The project was not without pitfalls and problems. The LLPA was frustrated at times with the inability of UWSP project staff- particularly those based in Stevens Point- to develop strong working relationships with the local agencies. The local project coordinator was somewhat surprised by the difficulty of coordinating planning activities among the three towns in the watershed: the idea of a watershed “cluster” never took hold in the towns. While a great deal of collaboration took place among the agencies and groups involved, it is not clear if all efforts for idea and responsibility sharing have been exhausted.

The challenges of effective watershed management are many, and to date there are few role models in Wisconsin or elsewhere to use as standards for measuring success. Those interested in the Long Lake watershed ultimately will use the water quality and ecological status of the lake to measure the effectiveness of planning and protection efforts. As of 2004, the lake remains on the brink of becoming increasingly eutrophic with undesirable consequences for water quality and ecology. The town and county plans and the LLPA’s internal plans create a framework for managing change and development in the watershed and improving stormwater runoff management through education and actual enhancement projects. The association and the local governments must now move into the action phase.

The balance of this final report goes over the progress and challenges of this project. It summarizes the activities and events that took place and notes their significance for watershed management. It concludes by highlighting the next steps for the Long Lake watershed.

Working with Local Planning Commissions

The project set out to work with a three-town cluster in the Long Lake watershed, encompassing the towns of Birchwood, Long Lake, and Madge. The project also worked closely with county government and officials, but it was clear early on that the county elected officials preferred that local comprehensive plans be “bottom-up” in nature and that the county plan would largely focus on integrating town plans into a cohesive county-wide plan. For this reason, a larger amount of time and effort was directed towards the towns.

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- Town Independence

The idea of a three-town cluster was meant to minimize the number of meetings associated with the watershed planning. The project coordinator began by scheduling a meeting of the Birchwood, Long Lake and Madge planning committees to discuss the watershed project and how it could relate to town comprehensive plans. Town committee members were reluctant to add more meetings to what already appeared to be a major time commitment with the NWRPC planning process. Additionally, the towns had originally subscribed to the comprehensive planning project with the notion that no one was going to be telling them what could and could not be in their plans. They were particularly skeptical of the county’s willingness to let towns plan their own future. This highly autonomous sentiment later proved very difficult to overcome through the cluster meetings, and it was agreed after the January 2003 cluster meeting in Birchwood that the project would focus on the three towns individually.

- LLPA member involvement in planning process

In addition to the involvement of the project coordinator, the watershed received direct representation in the comprehensive planning process through LLPA board members and association members serving on the planning committees. In Birchwood and Long Lake, board members were active participants on the planning committees. In Long Lake, past board members and Long Lake lakeshore residents served on the planning committee. Members of the committees who did not represent the LLPA or Long Lake itself were fairly cognizant of the importance of the lake, though no one was certain what could be done at the town level to protect it.

- Town – county relations in Washburn County

Like many counties, the relationship between town and county government in Washburn County is occasionally sour and at times confrontational. Issues in nearby Sarona and Beaverbook- the siting of a gravel pit and expansion of a landfill- were often raised as examples of a county government that places county-wide revenue over town well-being. The Long Lake Preservation Association has also experienced frustration with the county over shoreland protection issues. During the course of this planning effort, the county made at least two decisions that were deemed harmful to the lake. The county’s decision making is locally regarded as insufficiently attuned with the importance of lake protection and the need for consistency. This sense of county indifference no doubt contributed to the towns’ desire for a bottom-up, town-centered comprehensive planning process. The challenge this creates in the area of implementation, where towns are most often limited in their capacity to enact and enforce their own regulations or enforcement mechanisms.

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- Development of town capacity for planning and land use administration

Despite the apparent perception that towns cannot do much for lake protection, the comprehensive planning process and the plans themselves were generally seen as opportunities to increase town involvement in decision making. The creation of a planning commission and the acknowledgement of “village powers” that allow for town ordinances both serve as improvements to the towns governance capacity.

Additionally, town boards in Madge and Long Lake both exhibited high levels of interest and involvement in lake and watershed protection by directly responding to county decision and actions that were contrary to good lake protection principles. In Long Lake, the town was concerned about a newly improved lake access corridor created with a retaining wall and other design features prohibited by the county’s own shoreland zoning ordinance. In Madge, the town challenged the county’s approval of new lots in the 1000-foot shoreland zone that were smaller than lakes classification would allow. The towns were successful in the Board of Adjustments for both cases, but appeals are pending. These cases highlight the differing perspectives on watershed issues between the towns and the county and provide further reasoning for town-based planning and land use management. At the same time, members of the LLPA are concerned about the county’s insensitivity towards these issues and wish to continue pressing for an educational and training effort aimed at improving county-level capacity.

Challenges of Comprehensive Planning

The comprehensive planning underway in the Long Lake watershed and Washburn County is a consequence of two different initiatives. At the county level, some of the interest in comprehensive planning derives from lake organizations, including the LLPA, who had recently completed the lakes classification and shoreland zoning improvement process in the county. For the LLPA, the recommendations received in the earlier lake management plan from BARR Engineering suggested that watershed-wide land use controls would be needed to protect the lake’s water quality in the long run. At the State of Wisconsin level, the passage of comprehensive planning reform legislation and creation of a cost-share grant program provided meaningful incentives for planning, even in places that had not planned before. In Washburn County, the low level of overall community capacity and the novel nature of comprehensive planning made for a challenging situation.

- Ambiguous relationships among consultants and plan committees

The comprehensive planning process in Washburn County was coordinated by the Northwest Regional Planning Commission (NWRPC), the organization that prepared the original grant to the state. The NWRPC as an organization had limited experience preparing comprehensive plans. To complete the project, new staff was brought on board with similar deficits in experience. The working relationship between NWRPC planners

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and citizens serving on planning commissions and committees was at times tenuous. In the Town of Madge, the committee and town board were frustrated enough to withdraw from the process for a period of time, only to be brought back in by a high level of concern expressed by citizens and a change in facilitators offered by NWRPC.

The challenges between citizens and NWRPC were not clearly aided by the addition of the Long Lake watershed planning project coordinator. Mr. Olson had been living in the county for a year when he was hired by UWSP to serve as project coordinator. He shared with the NWRPC a similar lack of experience in community planning. For planning committee members it may have been difficult to differentiate the roles between the project coordinator and the NWRPC planners. The coordinator brought to the project his view that watershed planning needs to address many of the same things that comprehensive planning addresses: housing, economic development, transportation, etc. in addition to the more obvious natural resource issues. This view was tempered by a recognition that the comprehensive planning process was overall the responsibility of the NWRPC and the local towns, and that the best the watershed project could hope to do was to supplement their efforts and provide clear and rigorous information concerning the lake and the watershed as contributions to the comprehensive plan. With these limitations in mind, a large portion of the project coordinators time was directed towards assisting the LLPA develop their own strategic plans and increase their capacity as stewards of the watershed. This aspect is discussed below in the context of the LLPA.

- Uneasy relationships between Northwest Regional Planning Commission and UW Extension

The ambiguity of the project coordinators role did not well serve the relationship between UWSP and the NWRPC. This, however, was not the only challenge in RPC-University relations. Early in the comprehensive planning process, the Community, Natural Resource, Economic Development (CNRED) Extension agent for Washburn County made it clear to the NWRPC that her time was and workplan was determined by her committee of the County Board and could not be summarily shifted to aid in education and outreach efforts associated with comprehensive planning. This placed the NWRPC in a difficult position because in many counties the CNRED agent serves a significant role in planning efforts.

The NWRPC was able to work through the issue by tapping into regional and state Extension resources, including Michael Dresen, a statewide land use specialists associated with the Long Lake watershed project. For Mr. Dresen, Extension’s involvement in the watershed planning project made educational visits to Washburn County more justifiable since project matters and Extension presentations could be addressed almost simultaneously. Still, the three hour distance between UWSP and Washburn County would serve as a real impediment to regular and frequent interaction with local partners. The fact that the project coordinator was based in the watershed made up for much of this, but it is easy to speculate that this project would have been somewhat different if the watershed in question were physically closer to Portage County.

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- Balancing desire to focus on watershed with need to cover nine plan elements

The comprehensive planning legislation passed in Wisconsin was intended to create balanced local plans that simultaneously address many issues. This approach was lobbied for by development interests when the law was created avoid what they saw as plans focused solely on natural resource and agriculture protection. The one-size-fits-all appearance of the planning legislation, however, arguably confuses issues in places such as Washburn County where natural resources rightly belong at the top of the agenda.

In the case of the Long Lake watershed, one might wonder why, for example, the town planning committees spent so much time addressing economic development and community facilities issues, to use but two examples. While unemployment and public works garages are issues in Washburn County, there is little that a town alone could do to address them. Much of the necessary actions and policies in these arenas occur at the county or city level. Since much of the tax expenditure in the local area occurs at the county or school district level, it makes little sense for each town to vie independently for new economic development. For towns such as Long Lake, Birchwood, or Madge, it would seem meaningful enough for the towns to make “will-not-compete” pledges with nearby cities and villages regarding economic development. Towns could then focus their efforts on managing residential development- the most significant source of community change in their borders.

-Separating forecasts from goals, trends from desired futures

Even setting aside economic development and community facilities, towns were faced with a sort of developmentality that often accompanies planning efforts. The simple act of forecasting population growth can be seen as an attempt to accommodate incoming migration without due regard to community goals and objectives. In the case of the Long Lake watershed, nearly all in-migration and housing growth is completely unassociated with local or regional jobs or economic activity. For the purposes of planning, this would mean that there is actually almost no need for new housing or development in the region. Surely people desire to live in the region, just as people desire to own large luxurious homes or live in warm climates, but these desires should not be used as a basis for planning and should not be confused with regional workforce housing needs.

This issue was brought up by the project coordinator in the context of future land use mapping in the comprehensive planning process. The NWRPC provided estimates of future housing growth based on demographic trends. The project coordinator pointed out to the planning committees that nearly all the projected in-migration into watershed towns could actually be absorbed by existing seasonal housing stock. Thus, even if population were to grow in the towns, the towns should not feel compelled to allocate lands for new residential development simply because the trends and planning methods suggest they ought to.

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-The debate over and agreement to a slow-growth option

The discussion of population and housing forecasts led to serious and informed debate over future land use scenarios. UWSP staff from Stevens Point were asked by the project coordinator to provide assistance in the development of future land use maps. Planners, NWRPC staff, and citizen volunteers attended a session in Spooner to see GIS software demonstrations regarding future land use mapping. The NWRPC determined that they could adequately address FLU mapping without assistance from UWSP and carried forward with a computer-based mapping exercise as part of the planning process.

In the Long Lake watershed, the coordinator worked with facilitators from the NWRPC to manage the FLU mapping process. The committees were apprised of Paul McGinley’s research on the relationship between lot sizes, stormwater runoff, nutrient yields and water quality. At the same time, the communities were expressing a sincere desire to limit new development throughout the towns. Much of their debate centered on the allowable lot size for by-right land division and development, and in all three towns 20-acres was settled on as a standard. The project coordinator worked through different future development scenarios where landowners would inevitably seek smaller lots and asked the town planning committees how they would handle such scenarios. All three towns agreed that some sort of checklist would be needed to evaluate such proposals against the goals, objectives, and actions of their plans. Working with UWSP staff, the project coordinator investigated the potential for land division ordinances to be enacted as an implementation tool for the towns. Draft checklists and model subdivision ordinances were subsequently shared with the towns for their discussion and potential implementation.

-Using runoff as a performance standard for land divisions

The work of Paul McGinley and others at UWSP is central to the idea that a land division ordinance can help protect surface water resources. While it is perhaps common sense that smaller lots will be more extensively covered with more impervious surfaces, resulting in more runoff and nutrient yields, the exact numeric relationship among these variables is poorly understood. Calculating these relationships is important for the purposes of developing regulations related to lot size, as a local government needs to use dimensional standards that are not arbitrary. The runoff tables generated for Long Lake relate lot size, slope and soil to expected runoff and should be adopted by towns as part of their land division ordinances for implementing plan objectives. That the tables and this discussion on runoff are included in the comprehensive plans themselves should help legitimize efforts along these lines, as subdivision ordinances enacted in the future will need to be “in accordance with a comprehensive plan” as required by Wisconsin’s comprehensive planning law.

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Working with the LLPA

As mentioned above, a significant amount of the project efforts were directed towards the LLPA as an organization to work with them in achieving their mission of lake and watershed protection. The first task was to create a single document- a State of the Watershed (SOTW) report- summarizing the lake’s conditions and the various reports and analyses that had been carried out in the watershed. Included in the SOTW were numerous potential actions that could be taken by the LLPA, the towns, counties and others to protect the watershed. Given the different roles and capacities among government agencies and the lake association, it was argued that the LLPA would need to take leadership stakes on a number of the actions. The UWSP team facilitated a prioritization retreat of the LLPA leadership in January of 2004 to sort out the actions and express their priorities. From this list, the project coordinator worked with the LLPA to develop an action strategy for the future. High priority items were incorporated into a lake management plan submitted to the DNR the following spring. This grant is meant to cover the expenses of watershed improvement projects and community awareness building for the next two years. At that time, the LLPA will do well to revisit their priorities and begin scoping the next action agendas. Such a process can and should be repeated into the future to demonstrate the LLPA’s serious commitment to watershed protection.

- Developing a state of the watershed report

After a fitful start in the first winter of the project, the UWSP team agreed to use the DNR’s basin reports as a rough template for a State of the Watershed document. This report was initially drafted the following spring and was finalized over the course of the second year. The report maps out the numerous aspects of the watershed’s land, water, and social resources. Drafts of the report were circulated to DNR, county, and other state staff to yield feedback and additional action items to include in the report. A shared understanding of watershed issues was developed while preparing the report, culminating in an agreement that the watershed was “on the edge” of becoming undesirably degraded by excess nutrients and algae growth. This theme was carried into a widely-distributed brochure version of the report that was created in the summer of 2003.

- Prioritizing watershed needs

The LLPA and UWSP staff recognized that a long list of watershed actions was, by itself, not particularly useful. The fall of 2003 included numerous discussions concerning these items, and it was agreed that from the LLPA’s perspective the list needed to be prioritized. The project had conducted a survey over the previous summer to gauge community concerns and opinions on watershed environmental issues. These surveys expressed a high level of support for a variety of watershed issues, but little support for initiatives that may involve a great deal of government spending (incentive programs and land acquisitions, for example). These results were shared with the town planning committees

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and, along with an earlier survey from NWRPC, they support the cautious approach to future land use and development incorporated in the plans.

The LLPA still needed a way to express their own particular priorities for the future, and the board and experienced volunteers were called to meet in January 2004 to rank out the available items. Leading up to this meeting, the UWSP staff had reorganized the action items into four generic action types:

- Education and Outreach
- Resource Improvement
- Policies
- Monitoring

Actions were prioritized within the four action types and then the four types themselves were prioritized. The LLPA board largely agreed that their efforts should emphasize education and outreach. The project coordinator then began working with the LLPA executive committee and board to prepare for implementing their priorities.

- Identifying internal capacity and strengths of LLPA

The LLPA, like many lake associations, has both strengths and limitations. The association recognizes that they can not legislate or enforce good lake management practices, but they do believe that they should proactively lobby in favor of lake protection. The survey of LLPA members supported the board’s view on this issue. Unlike local, county, and state agencies, the LLPA can and does focus solely on the Long Lake watershed. This allows the LLPA to stay “on topic” and cultivate a clear position and message on local and regional issues. One of the association’s largest assets are its more than 400 dues paying members, representing nearly half the property owners on the lake. Another asset is the dedication and skills of the LLPA’s board members and volunteers. Hundreds of hours of their time were contributed to this project alone, and hundreds more will be needed in the future.

A major limitation for the LLPA, however, is also their over-reliance on volunteers. While committed, volunteers also have their own lives and cannot be expected to devote themselves to association activities. There is also a need for greater structure and institutional memory in a group with board turnover. Finally, the board realized over the course of this planning process that having someone like a project coordinator was extremely beneficial and increased their own productivity. The LLPA recognized, however, that their budget of membership dues and donations was insufficient to take on a staff person.

The project coordinator and the LLPA board sought out ways to capitalize on these assets and accomplish the group’s objectives and overall mission. The coordinator proposed a strategy that involved using LLPA’s revenue to hire and pay for an administrative assistant to assist in carrying out association projects. The money spent on the coordinator would be offered as local match for a lake management plan implementation

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grant from the DNR. Lake grant funds would thus cover the expenses of the actual projects that came out of the LLPA’s prioritization. This grant was developed in the spring of 2004 and awarded in the early summer. The LLPA plans on hiring their administrative assistant in January 2005.

- Concerns over local/county land use administration

As mentioned in the discussion of town capacity, there were several recent occasions where county decisions seemed at odds with good lake protection. The LLPA board proactively supported the Madge and Long Lake boards in their appeals to the Washburn County Board of Adjustment. From the LLPA perspective, these occurrences are but the latest examples in a string of poor decisions made at the county level. LLPA leadership has repeatedly pointed out how the county, in making poor decisions, is only shooting itself in the foot and should make decisions that are more sensitive to lake and watershed issues, especially since these are among the most valuable assets in the county. The LLPA and UWSP staff have attempted to raise awareness of these issues at the county level, including discussions at the county planning and zoning committee meetings and even a presentation on watershed development to the entire county board. Yet the ongoing turnover of elected officials and county staff present difficult obstacles to long-term awareness raising.

The project coordinator, in his new position as statewide land use specialist with UW Extension, is working to address this issue through a project aimed at understanding and improving the entire county workforce involved in land use regulations across the state. The training and turnover issues in Washburn County are likely to exist elsewhere, and the pending retirement of the Baby Boom generation suggests that an entire cohort of land use regulators are set to retire, taking with them their knowledge and experience. Following a workforce analysis study, UW Extension is proposing a statewide zoning official education project similar to the existing Lakes Leaders program. This idea is a direct consequence of the Long Lake watershed planning experience.

- Project administration

Among the many lessons learned in this project are the complexities of administering watershed planning projects across multiple state and local agencies. The billing and reimbursement arrangement for the project necessitated frequent summarizing and reporting. This by itself is a good thing, as it served to keep the project close to the originally designed timeline. At the same time, the process of developing and submitting reports became a task unto itself, one that ultimately led the contracted UWSP project coordinator to become more directly involved in how the LLPA prepares its own budgets so that the association could better plan for and manage the expense processing. For future projects involving outside contractors, lake associations would do well to work through their financial management systems ahead of time and maintain a degree of separation between grant management and contractor work load.

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The challenges of working with Universities were also highlighted in this project. As mentioned earlier, many of the people working on the project were located some distance from the community and were not capable of becoming closely engaged with the local actors. Telephone conference calls made up for some of this, but these long-distance meetings were occasionally beset by miscommunication or troubled understandings. IN an ideal world, each county would have a reasonably capable University or similar academic resource; this is unlikely to happen anytime soon. In the meantime, collaborations between lake associations and Universities would do well to explicitly state at the outset the mutual obligations and expectations.

A final complicating factor is the inevitable changeover in staffing and positions. Over the course of this project, the county zoning administrator left for a job in the neighboring county, the LLPA president stepped down to take another job outside the watershed, the regional lake specialist for DNR retired, the UWEX Basin Educator took a leave to have major surgery, the Extension land use specialist at UWSP retired, and the watershed planning project coordinator was hired to work in a similar role in Stevens Point. None of these events are necessarily fatal to watershed planning projects, but they do not make matters any easier and future multi-year projects would do well to anticipate the potential impacts of staff changeover.

Towards Watershed Integration

This project set out to do something that few people have tried to do in Wisconsin: wed together lake and watershed protection with community comprehensive planning. While significant progress was made, it would be inaccurate to say that the match was made in heaven. Town and watershed goals and objectives are closely aligned, and there is little doubt remaining that town governments can be proactively involved in resource protection. If anything, there is growing concern that counties are using their shoreland authority to preempt town-level protection efforts. This turns the initial design of shoreland zoning on its head, as Wisconsin towns were originally denied authority in shorelands because it was feared that they would be too lax in their enforcement. And while the towns of Birchwood, Long Lake, and Madge may not be at exactly the same point with regards to the Long Lake watershed, all three have created comprehensive plans that prioritize resource protection and include watershed concerns.

Finalizing local comprehensive plans and lake association strategic plans is only the first step towards long term watershed protection. More work is needed to formalize land division ordinances, implement educational initiatives, and continue to gauge citizen sentiment. County awareness and sensitivity must be increased, and collaborations between the LLPA, UWSP, UWEX, and the DNR need to continue to be built upon and reinforced.

The proof of watershed protection is in the water quality of the lake, and the LLPA is developing a strategy for long-term water quality monitoring. In addition, the LLPA should forward to the DNR the SOTW report and recommendations for formal inclusion

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in the lake management plan established by the BARR Engineering plan in 1994. This would serve to broaden the available actions for inclusion in LLPA, local, county, and state workplans. The SOTW report itself should be seen as the first in a series, and the staff at UWSP looks forward to a time, perhaps in 5 or 6 years, when the report will be completely updated and distributed again.