



LA CROSSE COUNTY
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Existing Conditions Report

Existing Conditions Executive Summary

The purpose of the Existing Conditions Report is to provide a clear understanding of La Crosse County's current physical and social characteristics. The report serves as a foundation for the next part of the Comprehensive Plan, which develops a collective vision for the future of the county.

Located along the Mississippi River, La Crosse County is a gateway to Wisconsin with a rich history and an exciting future. The Existing Conditions Report places the county within a regional context, noting its role as a key hub for transportation services in western Wisconsin. The county's diverse economy includes three institutions of higher education, two world-class hospitals, and a strong manufacturing base.



La Crosse County is part of the Driftless Area, a region of unglaciated hills and valleys that draws in tourists for its abundant trout streams and other outdoor recreation opportunities. Hiking and mountain biking trails line the bluffs that soar above the city of La Crosse, which has an attractive downtown that's home to restaurants and specialty shops.

The existing conditions report covers regional context, demographic trends, land use, housing, cultural and natural resources, utilities, transportation, diversity, sustainability, climate, economic development, and intergovernmental cooperation in La Crosse County. The goal is to ensure well informed discussion to inform policy decisions.

Land Use

One of the Comprehensive Plan's most important functions is to consider future land use policies and the Existing Conditions Report builds the platform for that discussion. La Crosse County's over 300,000 acres are mostly rural, with over 70% covered by farmland and forest and only 4.5% counted as residential. At the same time, growing demand for new residential and commercial development is evident in fast growing parts of the county. About 5,700 housing units were added between 2000 and 2016 with 60% of that growth occurring in the City of Onalaska and the Village of Holmen. The Comprehensive Plan seeks to balance the demand for new development against

the importance of farmland preservation. A 2017 census of agriculture noted that the number of farms in La Crosse County had fallen by 11% to 667 over the previous five years. Agriculture remains a vital and dynamic sector of the local economy. The Agricultural Resources chapter of this report describes the types of farming that predominate in La Crosse County. Major crops include corn and soybeans, with livestock pasturing and grazing also common.

Infrastructure

A network of critical public and private infrastructure links towns, villages, and cities



together in La Crosse County, ensuring access to essential utilities for residents and businesses. Major utility and other infrastructure projects that have been recently completed or are currently underway are described.

The Port of La Crosse handles nearly one million tons of commodities annually, connecting the upper Midwest to the world via the Mississippi River. However, La Crosse County is predicted to ship less

freight by water than it does now because gravel and sand currently shipped from the port is forecasted to move instead by rail in 2040. Two railroads – the Burlington Northern & Santa Fe (BNSF) and the Canadian Pacific (CP) railways – provide important trade arteries that connect La Crosse to the Twin Cities and Chicago. A relatively small amount of freight also arrives in the county on commercial passenger air carriers through the La Crosse Regional Airport. The airport and La Crosse’s Amtrak service are used by business travelers and bring tourists to the region.

Natural Resources

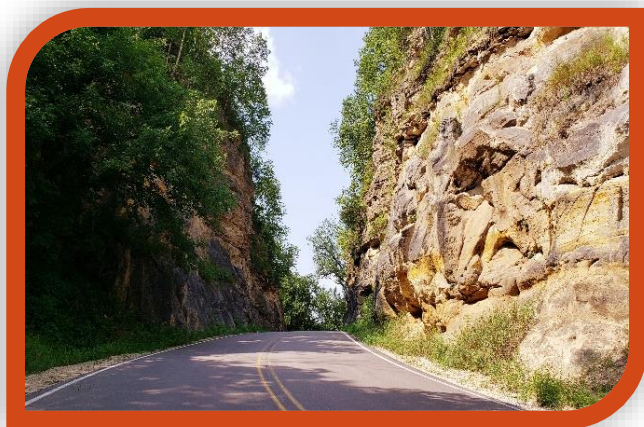
La Crosse County is home to a rich array of natural resources, including environmentally sensitive floodplains and wetlands. Located northwest of Holmen, the 4,000-acre Van Loon Wildlife Area features habitat that consists of flood plain forest, sand prairies and oak savanna. The preserve is a Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) public wildlife area. The second DNR public wildlife area is the Coulee Experimental Forest near Bangor, which is roughly 3,000 acres in size. Among the region’s most recognized feature are the dramatic bluffs on the western edge of the

county. The bluffs will require continued protection efforts due to increasing development pressures, the Natural Resources chapter of this report notes.

La Crosse County's abundant supply of groundwater has been a catalyst for historical growth in the region. Groundwater reserves are recharged by an average of over 30 inches a year of precipitation and supply drinking water to all county residents. The relatively high precipitation levels and the county's soil geology leave groundwater vulnerable to contamination, as documented in the Utilities and Community Facilities chapter of this report. Continued growth and development will increase demand on groundwater supplies and could heighten current and future contamination risks. Protecting the county's water supply for future generations is an important consideration of the Comprehensive Plan.

Economic Development

The retail trade, health care, government, and manufacturing sectors account for about half of all jobs in La Crosse County. Health care is currently the largest sector in terms of employment (with about 18% of the county's jobs). The county's unemployment rate has typically averaged below other Wisconsin counties with a heavier reliance on manufacturing. Still, manufacturing remains an important part of the local economy (accounting for just over 9% of jobs). The COVID-19 pandemic caused a sharp spike in unemployment in 2020 but the economy bounced back relatively quickly, with unemployment trending below 4% by the end of the year. Federal relief funding helped keep many local businesses afloat during the pandemic. The Economic Development chapter of this report notes that the biggest issue stressing our economy is the availability of workforce. As a result, economic development efforts are likely to focus on strategies around workforce attraction and development, as well as quality of life issues, such as affordable housing and childcare. Economic development needs are changing, and our strategies will need to change as well.



Tax Incremental Financing (TIF) is likely the most important economic development tool available to cities and villages, and towns to a limited degree in La Crosse County. The Economic Development chapter of this report lists all TIF districts in the county.

According to State Statute, municipalities are not allowed to create new districts or increase the size of an existing district if more than 12% of the municipality's assessed value is located within existing districts. Both the City of La Crosse and the Village of Rockland are currently over the 12% threshold, meaning they will need to retire existing TIF districts before they can create new districts or add areas to their current districts.

Diversity

This report also features a detailed presentation of La Crosse County's demographics, a new addition to the county's Comprehensive Plan. The county's population has grown substantially over recent decades, but workforce population is shrinking, which is presenting challenges for the local economy. An understanding of these changes and of the county's demographic make-up is key to the consideration of the future distribution of services and infrastructure.



Although La Crosse County has a strong and growing economic base, persistent poverty among families and individuals presents a major problem for policymakers. This report's Demographics chapter shows that an estimated 7% of families and 14% of individuals in the County live below the poverty line. These numbers have increased by about 25% over the last decade. Wages have risen significantly over the same period but have failed to keep up with rising healthcare, rent, and childcare costs.

Substantial disparities in educational attainment, income, and home-ownership levels exist in La Crosse County between the county's predominantly White population and minority Black and Asian-American communities. A detailed presentation of these disparities is included in the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion chapter of this report.

In April 2021, the La Crosse County Board of Supervisors approved a resolution declaring racism as a public health crisis. The resolution recognized disparities in health and other

categories and launched a process to combat the resulting negative outcomes for marginalized communities.

Collaboration

Intergovernmental cooperation is a critical component to building on La Crosse County's strengths and confronting challenges described in this report. La Crosse County contains 18 units of local government, which includes two cities, 12 towns, and four villages.

The Intergovernmental Cooperation chapter notes existing collaboration between those units of government, including in regional transportation planning. The continuing project to facilitate boundary discussions between municipalities is also discussed.

In recent years, intermunicipal agreements have been achieved between the Village of Holmen and the City of Onalaska and between the Town of Holland and the Village of Holmen. Discussions between the City of La Crosse and the Town of Shelby are ongoing. Boundary agreements can produce an understanding of where future annexations and ensuing new development may occur. This supports planning around transit and municipal services.

A Sustainable Future

Taken as a whole, the Existing Conditions Report offers a detailed picture of the diverse communities, dynamic economy, and abundant natural resources found within La Crosse County. The report documents the county's strengths and challenges, with the aim of developing the understanding necessary to create a Comprehensive Plan for a thriving, sustainable future for all residents of La Crosse Country.