

Summary of themes from the Summer 2008 Listening Sessions

Purpose of this Summary

This summary is an analysis of patterns, or themes, that emerged during the county-wide listening sessions conducted as part of the citizen participation plan for the county comprehensive planning effort. This summary is an addition to the many summary documents that were generated from each listening session. These other documents are readily available in the comprehensive plan section of the Vernon County website. This document is offered to assist the Phase II development of Goals, Objectives and Action Plans that need to reflect a broad understanding of citizen concerns as well as the specifics. In particular this report makes an effort to describe a county-wide context and identify where the diverse regions of the county find unity. Building on this unity will lead to a coherent plan and successful implementation of the final plan.

Regions within Vernon County

The listening sessions took place in groupings of County Supervisory Districts. The Supervisors convened the listening sessions and decided: where to meet, when would be a convenient day and time, and how to get the word out for maximum participation. The districts were grouped according to the Comprehensive Plan Commission's sense of what constituted a logical "neighborhood." As it turns out these groupings were sensible—there were real differences between groups, and also mostly agreement within groups. This section tries to make sense of the differences and the following section will analyze the points of unity between regions.

Regionalism in Vernon County is built into the landscape: steep topography, rivers, soil resources, cities and villages. These barriers and attractions are often reinforced by transportation infrastructure that keeps areas isolated, or pulls citizens to other cities and counties. As a result we have a very diverse base of world-views and social/cultural groups that need to be understood as we plan for the whole county.

Mississippi River

Vernon County's western edge is the Mississippi River Valley that offers a rich mixture of natural beauty, wildlife and plants from the bluffs down to the wildlife refuge and fish hatchery. Highway 35 facilitates travel north (La Crosse) and south (Prairie du Chien) that provide the major centers for jobs and commerce. There was a sense that the absence of Bergen Township and Stoddard in the meeting was in part due to their orientation towards the major center, La Crosse. There was also a sense of isolation from the county and hope that in future they could be more integrated into the county and particularly the tourism efforts of the county

Prime Agricultural Lands

Inland from the Mississippi River is a region of prime agricultural soil (50% is Class I or II by NRCS definitions.) This area stretches east from the bluffs to the US Highway 14 corridor. The prime agriculture designation forms a patchwork because of our steep slopes, and this land is productive beyond the mapped boundaries if there is good stewardship and use of conservation practices. These areas are rural culturally and residents gravitate to city centers along the US Highway 14 corridor. Viroqua provides a hub of commercial activity, but often mailing address location, or school district identity forms the basis for cultural affiliations that subdivide this large region. There is also the tendency of these rural areas to be locally very tightly-knit—neighbors help each other, people regularly gather at a local bar or restaurant, and there is a pride in being self-sufficient at the very local level. **Protection of land for agricultural use was a strong message from this group.**

Cities

The Cities of Viroqua and Westby form another distinct region in the county. Natural resource protection was a major issue. **These more centrally located cities were unified in wanting land use controls and zoning county-wide. There was no disagreement on this in the listening sessions¹ and this unity on the subject was remarkable. This attitude provides a contrast with the rural areas of the county that were more divided on this issue. Non-city citizens often wanted the effects of land use regulation/zoning² without being comfortable with the implementation of regulation that would make it possible.**

Kickapoo Valley

Further east is the Kickapoo Valley region of the county. This unique culture and landscape results from the physical characteristics of the river valley (trout fishing,

¹ One participant in the Viroqua Listening Session wanted future planning to stress the use of incentives and not regulation of land use, but he was a resident of Liberty Township, not the City. His comment also drew a counter argument from a resident of the City.

² Examples include not allowing houses to randomly develop on the landscape, protection of farm land base, or protection of scenic and natural resources for the enjoyment of residents and tourists.

Participation Element of the Vernon County Comprehensive Plan

scenic beauty, historic flooding) and the history that resulted in the development of the Kickapoo Reserve. The valley was represented in a single listening session and found a focus on protection of area natural resources rather than a concern about preservation of agriculture. There was talk about eco-tourism opportunities and within this is a specialized agri-tourism that brings people onto small farms to experience farm work and rural scenery. This is an area of the county with plentiful Amish farms that could be regarded as agri-tourism in place.

Hillsboro region

The eastern part of the county is the rural Hillsboro and City of Hillsboro region that, being on the edge of the county, orients to the Interstate Highway to the north and US Highway 80 south to Richland Center. This directs the focus of commerce/jobs away from Vernon County and to adjoining counties. Redirecting that out-migration and attracting new residents to the Hillsboro area was a stated goal. Cultivating a diverse economy (manufacturing, tourism and agriculture) that would provide family-supporting jobs so the youth can stay and new people would relocate locally was a prime concern.

All participants around the county wanted to work closer to home and wanted opportunities for the young people to stay in the area for home and job. How to reverse this pull of workers away from the county for jobs and commerce and bring the economic activity into Vernon County will depend on building on what we can agree on as Vernon County citizens and uniting these areas of agreement to the stated goals, objectives and action plan for the county.

Points of Unity

Strength in Diversity

Diversity was seen as a strength in several areas: the agriculture sector, the many education alternatives, tourism opportunities, new people attracted to the area (from Amish to urban flight) and small business orientation towards many small businesses (not dependent on a single big employer.) In all of these areas people had a sense that the diversity could be put to better use if there was more collaboration and cooperation. Some examples follow.

We have a diverse agriculture sector, everything from high input, vertically-integrated distribution system to low-input, local (even horse drawn) distribution and all the territory in between. There is a "live and let live" attitude unless a person is being harmed or there is the perception that one model might dominate to the point that the other will not be able to function on the landscape or will not be profitable. As long as there is a balance and all producers and processors accomplish good stewardship of the land and water, people generally were open to making a place for all types of agriculture.

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Education was not listed as a major concern, and there was pride in the local school systems. There are many options for schooling K-12 and the comments that came up centered on concerns about the budget crisis public schools face and the resulting loss of programs. The value placed on education as a way to help families and communities prosper includes some challenges. Making higher education an achievable, affordable, realistic part of a busy life and something that leads to local employment formed the basis of the conversations. Some thought that collaborating from K-12 up to technical college and university was needed to be more effective. Making all levels work together better, as well as forging collaborations in our K-12 schools that are so diverse will be a future challenge, but is seen as a way to build our local capacity.

Tourism options in the county are diverse and were perceived as not well-coordinated. Collaborating to create and promote the Mississippi River, Kickapoo River and Cities as a destination identity was seen as a path that would deliver growth in this area that has so much promise given our diverse natural resource base.

With our aging population we need new people and workers to be ready to provide labor for potential businesses. Often new residents use telecommunication systems that is essentially a “bring their job with them” model. The diverse business base also is seen as a strength and it was often mentioned that we want to encourage this and cultivate new small businesses to avoid the dependence on a single source of jobs that could relocate or close and be a shock on our economy and tear apart our communities.

Sustainability

Participants also agreed that the future will depend on planning that keeps sustainability in mind, and taps into opportunities for “green” energy and technologies. This should not be a surprising theme because at-the-pump gas prices topped \$4.00 in the summer of 2008. Even given that reality, there was a sense people understood that the long-term future will be more expensive for commuters, government and businesses that depend on fuel, petroleum-based inputs, and electricity. From county road maintenance to school bus routes people were aware of the problems and ready for innovative ways to approach this future challenge.

We are united in support of locally produced fuels and electricity that will help our local economy with new jobs and opportunities for commerce. There was a collective hope that this alternative energy would provide savings for users by providing various energy options. We also saw a need to have a more sustainable approach to travel options and habits—car pooling, public transport systems, park-and-ride, car sharing. We also desire more local options for jobs, commerce, and recreation in an effort to minimize our need to travel for these necessities of life.

Control issues

Many areas of the county voiced concern about State-level government intruding into what most consider local-level issues. Put in a positive form, we are united in favoring local control. This can be carried to the extreme of the landowner level: "I want to be able to do whatever I want with my land." But in general there was a sense that the Township level of government should and could handle regulation--if there will be any. While this local wisdom prevails, citizens had many concerns that the towns are ill-equipped to counter, or unwilling to regulate.

Another aspect of the dilemma we face is that while many want the county to counteract pushy state agencies,³ there is a hesitancy to give the county the power to actually do it. This is similar to the situation of people calling for land use regulations, but those same people being unclear and uncomfortable talking about a particular institutional mechanism. Understanding the desires and discomforts is the first step to deciding what to do.

One participant in Sterling Township Listening Session stated clearly, "We want to keep the status quo." Given the State's habit of creating uniform rules that we will need to conform to, and the continuing flow of people into the county that provides needed new energy, but also new complexity on the landscape and in communities, it becomes difficult to identify a status quo. Economic stagnation might result in things staying the same, but no one attending the listening sessions provided a cheering voice for stagnation. People wanted a more vibrant economy that provided jobs. They also wanted thoughtful change that preserves agricultural land and tourism options and reduces the patchwork of random development that results from market pressures and chance. There is a sense something needs fixing, but the mechanism and needed locus of control for effectively making things better is not clear.

³ There were complaints about DNR requirements that make road maintenance more expensive, DOT plans that squash local vision of how transportation fits our landscape and DATCP rules that do not allow locals to consider local conditions before approval of major development projects.

As We Move Ahead in the Planning Process

This Comprehensive Plan is a first step to create goals that we agree will improve our lives in the county. As each element workgroup makes decisions about an action plan, they need to consider the themes covered in this paper. In all our recommendations do we maintain respect for diversity and ways to bring collaboration to diverse groups? Do we have innovative thinking that results in a more sustainable Vernon County at the center of our action plans? Are we critically examining the power position of the county and what mechanisms would be most effective and justifiable to make the county or other unit of local government/organization a potent voice for local concerns?

In the end we need to thank those who participated in the Listening Session events in all the neighborhoods. These active and engaged citizens are also our strength and we, as commission members and workgroup participants, need to integrate this local knowledge into our assessment of current conditions and our goals for the future.

