

A County at the Crossroads: The Choice is Ours

**The Land Stewardship Project's vision for Winona County
and response to Winona County's 2014 Draft Comprehensive Plan**

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This report has been developed in 2014 by the members of the Land Stewardship Project's Winona County Organizing Committee. For further information, contact Doug Nopar at LSP's Lewiston office (507) 523-3366. This publication, and the companion *Expanded Land Stewardship Project Critique of Winona County Proposed Comprehensive Plan – September 2014*, is also available at:

www.landstewardshipproject.org/organizingforchange/localorganizing.

A. Overview

Land Stewardship Project members look to the future of Winona County and envision a county that expands on its strong agricultural history, preserves its unparalleled beauty and natural landscape, protects the environment, and creates a vibrant economy with a growing number of living wage jobs. Protection of the natural environment for the health and well-being of the land and for future generations is of paramount concern for our members.

Given our roots as an agricultural organization we envision an agriculture that builds healthy soils, creates clean water and air, helps young people get started farming, helps family-sized farms flourish, and builds vibrant small towns and rural communities. LSP envisions an agriculture where family-sized farms do not need to keep expanding in order to survive, rather that they have the local consumer, institutional, commodity market, and public policy support needed to make them viable and wealth-building.

Winona County is at a crossroads in two critical areas -- agriculture and the frac sand industry. Will the County continue, and build upon, our legacy of conservation-based small and mid-sized family farms as the basis of agriculture in the County, or will we open the door for expanded industrial farming? Will the County become a center for the frac sand industry or will it not? These choices are up to the County's citizens and ultimately, the Winona County Board.

LSP believes that Winona County must make a choice and prioritize an agriculture that creates opportunities for a growing number of its residents, rather than pave the way for a more industrial form of agriculture that provides ownership opportunities for fewer and fewer people while threatening the environment and rural communities.

Additionally, LSP sees the threat of industrial frac sand mining and processing as an industry that could fundamentally change the character of Winona County for the worse. It could forever alter the agricultural nature of the County, compromising the health and safety of County residents, and negatively impacting the land, air and water. LSP members, as well as a wide cross-section of the public, believe that frac sand mining and processing should not move forward in the County.

Unfortunately, the proposed Winona County Comprehensive Plan does little to protect the County from agricultural industrialization or from the frac sand industry. And it misses the opportunity to build an agriculture that broadens opportunity, better protects the environment and reinvigorates the rural community economy.

B. Key concerns with the proposed Comprehensive Plan

- 1) **The process** has failed to involve a diversity of citizens and opinions expressed by the public. It has lacked balance and robust discussion of varying points of view.
- 2) **Agriculture's future** -- Rather than suggesting that Winona County increase opportunities for a growing number of people to farm and keep industrial agriculture and factory farms in check, the proposed Plan fails to anticipate the economic, social and environmental consequences of agricultural industrialization and consolidation. One current proposal by the largest dairy farm in Winona County to expand from 1426 cows to 3326 cows could serve as the catalyst for a wave of new consolidation in the livestock industry, causing disturbing changes in Winona County and prompting a further decrease in owner-operated livestock farms. The Plan also fails to call for reform of the County's feedlot enforcement program, a program that has contributed to the demise of numerous small and mid-sized dairy farms, and neglected problems created by some of the largest livestock farms.
- 3) **Frac sand** -- Despite the frac sand industry being fully present in the City of Winona and making serious attempts to get established in rural Winona County, the proposed plan does not specifically mention frac sand anywhere. Its minimal mention of mining inadequately addresses this issue. Ultimately, the Plan fails to protect Winona County, a County with no industrial mining history, from the looming frac sand and corporate oil and gas industry that has created numerous environmental, economic and social problems for citizens and the land in western Wisconsin and other parts of the U.S.
- 4) **Water quality** -- Rather than looking seriously at water quality in the County and discussing new strategies to address the 20% of the county's rural wells already over the safe drinking water standard for nitrates, the Plan offers no correctives that have not already been tried in the past. Clean water is a key priority for Land Stewardship Project members and fellow Winona County citizens. Simply put, the status quo is not good enough.
- 5) **Property rights** -- Another concern is that the proposed Plan includes references to "land rights education" as a responsibility of County government. Given the highly controversial and polarizing nature of property rights discussions in the County in recent years, LSP is concerned about the intent of this language, and how it will be implemented, especially when property rights sentiments received such minimal support in written public comments.
- 6) **Climate change** -- the proposed Plan fails to mention climate change, quite likely the most pressing environmental and economic concern of the times. The highly variable and severe weather of recent years presents numerous challenges for farms, businesses, natural resources and local government institutions. Despite numerous public comments on the subject and despite the ramifications of climate change being fully documented in peer reviewed research, the Plan leaves out any acknowledgement

of Winona County's need to prepare for climate change, and need to involve itself in efforts to prevent it.

C. LSP's vision for Winona County

Land Stewardship Project members look to the future of Winona County and envision a county that expands on its strong agricultural history, preserves its unparalleled beauty and natural landscape, protects the environment, and creates a vibrant economy with a growing number of living wage jobs. We envision abundant cultural, recreational and educational opportunities for local residents and visitors, and a county that will thrive if it can create opportunities for youth, working age people, elders, farm and non-farm residents, and people from a wide variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Given our roots as an agricultural organization we envision an agriculture that builds healthy soils, creates clean water and air, helps young people get started farming, helps family-sized farms flourish, and builds vibrant small towns and rural communities.

Protecting the soil in Winona County is paramount. It is our most precious resource. The County's topography is extremely vulnerable to erosion and water contamination and our forbearers' historical efforts to save the soil through contour farming, terraces, crop rotation, and ponds must be re-invigorated, not cast aside. We must also protect the air, the water and our fragile karst geology. Water quality protection, in particular, is of critical importance for LSP members.

Specifically, LSP wants to see:

- More successful family-sized farms, not fewer
- Greater access to land and farms for beginning farmers
- Contour strips and soil building crop rotations restored
- More land in hay and pasture and more livestock on grass
- A stronger sense of community between longtime residents and Hmong and Latino farmers and farmworkers
- More local food produced for, and consumed by, families and institutions in our community
- And local, state and federal policy that supports this.

We also believe that the kind of agriculture we envision is at risk. Agricultural industrialization threatens the small-to-mid-size farms that have been the backbone of Winona County's agriculture for more than 150 years. It threatens our small town economies as well. We are concerned that a continued shift to row crop farming from an agriculture historically based on dairy and cattle production (and its legume and hay-based crop rotation) will create greater environmental problems: soil erosion, stream and river sedimentation, diminished and degraded fish and wildlife habitat, and worsening levels of nitrates and pesticides in private and municipal wells and water supplies.

Additionally, we see the threat of industrial frac sand mining and processing, an industry that could fundamentally change the character of Winona County for the worse, forever altering the agricultural nature of the County, compromising the health and safety of County residents, and negatively impacting the land, air and water.

We note that the climate does appear to be changing significantly and is already showing signs of increased drought and flooding, as well as unusual weather patterns. Winona County must prepare for these extremes and work to promote residents' preparation for and adaptation to these extremes. Winona County needs to be a leader and model for promoting energy conservation and the development of non-fossil fuel energy sources. This leadership will also help reduce the oil and gas industry's demand for frac sand, and reduce mining pressure in this region.

This LSP vision is not based on nostalgia, nor on fantasy. It is based on our belief that communities with a deeply involved citizenry can work to create the kind of community they desire, one where economic, cultural and educational opportunities exist for all of its residents, and where the land is well cared for generations to come. This vision is based on LSP members' values: stewardship of the land, importance of the small to mid-sized farm, and vital rural communities. And it is based on many decades of social and economic research that shows that economic vitality is directly correlated with the number of farms in a given community, and that the social and economic well-being of local rural communities benefits from increasing the number of farms, not simply by increasing the volume of commodities produced (Osterberg and Wallinga, 2004). Additional studies confirming this phenomenon include: MacCannell (1988), Goldschmidt (California, 1978), Gomez and Zhang (Illinois, 2000), Durrenberger and Thu, (Iowa, 1996), Abeles-Allison and Conner (Michigan, 1990), Foltz et al. (Wisconsin, 2002), Chism and Levins (Minnesota, 1994), and Lobao and Stofferahn, 2007 (see abstract below).

Future Winona County leaders can also join LSP in advocating for major reforms in federal farm policy, a policy that has, for more than 60 years, led to greater farm consolidation, fewer farms, fewer ag-related business, struggling small towns, and degraded soils, air and water quality and wildlife habitat. LSP believes that Winona County must make a choice and prioritize an agriculture that creates opportunity for a growing number of its residents and tremendous benefits for the economy of our county, not an agriculture that restricts ownership opportunities to fewer and fewer residents.

The County needs to do everything it can to help current farmers be profitable, without needing to expand their operation and thereby reduce opportunities for new farmers. Unfortunately, the suggestion put forth by some current County Board members that "We want all kinds of agriculture, big and small" just will not work. If we want "big," we won't have "small or medium," particularly because the larger operations have an unfair advantage when it comes to government subsidies and access to markets and credit. Research shows that communities cannot simultaneously have thriving small and mid-sized farms, and thriving industrial farms.

Communities that promote industrial farming lose economically, lose their community social fabric, and hurt the environment (see citations on page 7).

D. LSP recommendations for specific sections of the Comprehensive Plan

Agricultural Areas

- More mid-sized dairy farms needed
- Reform the County's feedlot enforcement program. In the past, this program has unnecessarily helped push many small and mid-sized dairy farms out of business, while failing to adequately address environmental and public health problems caused by some of the largest livestock facilities in the County.
- More sustainable and/or organic farms needed using practices that help preserve the county.
- Land that is now being depleted should move into sustainable and/or organic production.
- More livestock needed outside on the land
- More small diversified vegetable farms needed to meet demand for local foods
- Continue the present limits on the size of industrial livestock operations
- More education and encouragement of beneficial farming practices (season extension tools for produce growers, deep-bedded straw bedding and hoop housing for hogs, and rotational grazing for dairy and beef cattle).
- Preserve prime farmland, fewer houses in agricultural areas, no houses in inappropriate locations. No prime farmland used for industrial purposes.
- No frac sand mining. Destroys agricultural land, unnecessarily drives up the cost of marginal land and impedes beginning farmers getting land
- Conduct a study that examines the animal carrying capacity of the land in the County

Economic Development

- Develop new, locally owned, produced, and distributed renewable power (energy) sources and infrastructure with the goal of ultimately becoming energy-independent
- Expand access to locally produced foods

Rural Development (rural communities, freeway interchanges, rural industrial, rural residential)

- Develop new renewable power sources and infrastructure
- Create better broadband access. This helps with rural economic opportunities, better I.T. (information technology) needed too.
- Grow rural communities – but no houses in the wrong places, preserve prime farmland

Natural Resource Protection

- Preserve Winona County's natural features.
- Preserve and protect the soil and water. Restore wetlands.
- Integrate "citizen science" and water quality, get citizens, science teachers and students involved in research.
- Make well-testing results public
- No frac sand mining or processing. Focus on renewable energy. Frac sand mining & processing are bad for water and air.

Community Health and Well-Being

- Encourage farming practices that maximize the health of livestock, plants and people
- Study public health effects of industrial confinement agriculture
- No new large-scale confinement agriculture. Phase out old ones.
- No frac sand mining or processing -- bad for water, air, and road safety
- More people raising their own food, joining local CSA's, and buying from local farms
- Build a Community food hub – kitchen & freezer space, etc. for preservation of & infrastructure for distribution of locally grown foods – connect this with health care, senior care, medical care

Transportation

- Promote public transportation system for rural areas – reduce driving and build communication among residents, connect this with senior care and food hub

Citizen Involvement

- More diversity in local government, more young people and minorities involved
- Educate young families about availability & affordability of locally grown foods and the connection to better health
- More younger families wanted in our communities
- Community healthcare for the elderly, poor and disabled - adds jobs to the community and community connections and relationships

E. Citations:

The community effects of industrialized farming: Social science research

and challenges to corporate farming laws Linda Lobao¹ and Curtis W. Stofferahn²

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Abstract. Social scientists have a long history of concern with the effects of industrialized farming on communities. Recently, the topic has taken on new importance as corporate farming laws in a number of states are challenged by agribusiness interests. Defense of these laws often requires evidence from social science research that industrialized farming poses risks to communities. We evaluate studies investigating the effects of industrialized farming on community well-being from the 1930s to the present. Using a pool of 51 studies, we document the research designs employed, evaluate results as to whether adverse consequences were found, and delineate the aspects of community life that may be affected by industrialized farming. Of these studies, 57% found largely detrimental impacts, 25% were mixed, finding some detrimental impacts, and 18% found no detrimental impacts. Adverse impacts were found across an array of indicators. Few positive effects of industrialized farming were found across studies. The results demonstrate that public concern about industrialized farms is warranted.

Additional studies: The social and economic well being of local rural communities benefits from increasing the number of farmers, not simply increasing the volume of commodity produced ([Osterberg and Wallinga 2004](#)). Economic concentration of agricultural operations tends to remove a higher percentage of money from rural communities than when the industry is dominated by smaller farm operations, which tend to circulate money within the community. [Goldschmidt \(1978\)](#) documented this as early as 1946 in California, one of the first states where industrialized agriculture developed. Specifically, he compared two agricultural communities, one dominated by larger industrialized farms with absentee ownership and a high percentage of hired farm labor, and the other community was dominated by smaller owner-operated farms. The latter community was found to have a richer civic and social fabric with more retail purchases made locally and with income more equitably distributed. A similar study by [MacCannell \(1988\)](#) of comparable types of communities found that the concentration and industrialization of agriculture were associated with economic and community decline locally and regionally. Studies in Illinois ([Gomez and Zhang 2000](#)), Iowa ([Durrenberger and Thu 1996](#)), Michigan ([Abeles-Allison and Conner 1990](#)), and Wisconsin ([Foltz et al. 2002](#)) demonstrated decreased tax receipts and declining local purchases with larger operations. A Minnesota study ([Chism and Levins 1994](#)) found that the local spending decline was related to enlargement in scale of individual livestock operations rather than crop production.