

COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT FACT SHEET SERIES

#1 – *Overview of Community Environmental Assessment*

The COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT FACT SHEET SERIES was designed to assist County Extension faculty in their work with community groups on local environmental assessment and impact planning. This fact sheet introduces the series and provides a list of materials currently available.

How can this series assist your community?

The ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT SERIES provides a set of questionnaires and worksheets that community members can use to consider natural and environmental resources in conjunction with other local management decisions. The fact sheets do not provide any automatic answers about how to manage local environmental resources, and cannot substitute for the work of a sophisticated planning firm or agency. However, they can assist community leaders to develop their own set of questions and guidelines to share with planning professionals involved with community decisions.

Local officials are faced with concerns about jobs, housing, recreation opportunities, attracting more business, and many other pressing issues. Decisions about any of these important community activities may affect the environment in one way or another. As leaders study their community environment, they will become more familiar with strategies and resources available to help integrate environmental resource topics into community planning for the future.

As community leaders work through the series, they will become more able to:

- base decisions on demonstrated community values
- describe environmental resources - kinds, functions, quality, potential uses
- anticipate land use management opportunities and problems
- identify missing information needed to enhance community quality of life.

Worksheets can be used to:

- get the community started on solving local problems while waiting for other planning staff resources to become available
- gather information to enable quick reaction to a development proposal
- identify questions to be addressed by a planning consultant
- update the local land use plan

Why should the community assess its environmental resources?

Wisconsin communities are growing and changing. To some communities, growth is a welcome relief bringing new vitality to an area with too few jobs or community resources. To others, growth is an unwanted intrusion disturbing the locally preferred quality of life. Some communities are familiar with the demands of growth and have developed systems to manage the often-difficult decisions that are endemic to any change. Others ignore the benefits of planning and accept change as dictated by individuals or businesses. Most communities are somewhere in the middle of these extremes.

But even when sophisticated in planning, communities often neglect to consider the complicated needs of the natural systems included within their political boundaries. Laws, strategies, or programs such as the following address parts of our ecological support system.

- sewage treatment districts
- shoreland preservation regulation
- priority watershed plans
- lake management districts
- farm land preservation zoning
- wellhead protection zones

But no zoning law or planning system requires that communities understand how all the parts interact to maintain the integrity of natural systems. It is up to the community, county, or regional planning system to understand local natural resources and incorporate potential management needs into a documented planning system.

What can communities learn from environmental assessment?

Trying to understand natural systems is like trying to understand how the human brain works. The physical and biological conditions which enable natural systems to function are very complex. Humans have learned through accidents and intentional tinkering that we do not understand all the requirements.

While we continue to improve our understanding of the components of natural systems and their potential benefits to global health, we must still proceed with caution in management decisions. We now know, for example, that wetlands serve important functions. In the past, soils present in wetland areas were valued primarily for their agricultural potential. Wetlands were often drained for the perceived economic benefit of crop sales. The loss of potential long term economic and environmental benefits from water quality/quantity protection, aesthetic appeal, and recreation uses was ignored.

Community environmental assessment can provide a systematic process for identifying, describing, and evaluating community natural resources and human resources in order to improve decisions about their management.

Making the choice to assess the community environment does not imply that identified resources must be preserved or protected. It does imply that the community must be knowledgeable about its resources, so that development decisions reflect all community values and not just the economic ones. A community may wish to locate a new housing development, for example. An environmental assessment can help determine which lands are most suited for the development while having the least impact on local quality of life or the ability of natural systems to function.

Implicit in the environmental assessment process is the need for community involvement. Citizens both have the right to determine their future and have much to offer about the history and value of resources in the community. The assessment process described in the fact sheet series recommends that the community be involved in developing a vision for their community and gathering data to contribute towards management of that future.

What is the role of environmental assessment in growth management?

Today, Wisconsin communities recognize that wisely managed natural resources play a major role in community satisfaction and economic development. Our new understanding of growth management is to manage for sustainability. That means "balancing economic development and environmental protection in accord with the carrying capacity of the land . . . where conservation of the natural environment and development of the human community [are] equally important."

As our population continues to grow, community planners will be faced with difficult decisions about how to balance these two needs. We may continue to make some mistakes. But management with environmental needs in mind will reduce our future costs for repairing unintended losses.

The COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT FACT SHEET SERIES

#2 — TAKING STOCK

A short questionnaire designed to help the community:

- summarize the status of environmental resource management in the community
- summarize citizen values and perceptions about managing local environmental resources
- identify topics needing more information before further planning can take place
- consider a strategy for incorporating environmental resource management into future planning efforts

#3 — USING INFORMATION ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES IN LAND USE PLANNING

What can a community do? This fact sheet will describe how to use the information developed through use of #2 - *TAKING STOCK* and #5 - *THE ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES INVENTORY* into land use planning activities in the community. The fact sheet includes a summary of current environmental management tools available to communities and a summary worksheet which describes: mapped information, ecosystem relationships and issues, info shared with consultant, other plans.

#4 — THE ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES INVENTORY

An overview useful for explaining the process to potential user groups.

#5 — COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES INVENTORY FACTSHEETS AND WORKSHEETS

Worksheets to help accomplish an environmental resources inventory of the community environment, open space lands, and land in consideration for changed uses. Worksheets identify what questions to ask, and are best completed with the assistance of a technical advisor. Fact sheets for some topics are included in *Factsheet #9, Support Resources*. Worksheets address: human resources such as aesthetic qualities, cultural features, and human health; and natural resources such as geographic setting and resources, agricultural land resources, surface water features, water supply, plant communities, and wildlife and wildlife habitat.

#6 — WHAT IS A COMMUNITY IMPACT ANALYSIS?

A one page overview useful for explaining the process to potential user groups. This fact sheet will include a summary of types of environmental impacts which could be evaluated by a consultant to provide information for local management decisions. To include background on impact evaluation and the Leopold Matrix.

#7 — POTENTIAL IMPACTS FROM DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES

A summary of considerations for review of development impacts. This fact sheet can help guide a local task force while they work with a consultant to compile more detailed information.

#8 — HOW TO SET UP THE IMPACT ASSESSMENT PROCESS

The Leopold Matrix instructions plus worksheets.

9 — SUPPORT RESOURCES

Background information about air quality, cultural features, floodplain protection, groundwater, shorelands and wetlands, the Wisconsin Environmental Policy Act (WEPA)

This series was developed by the University of Wisconsin Community Environmental Assessment Task Force, University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension: including: Elaine Andrews, Gene Bunnell, Steve Grabow, Mindy Habecker, Andy Lewis, Joe Moskal, Dave Neuendorf, John Roberts, and Dave Such.

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