

Johnson County Planning Department

What Is Planning?

A description of the purpose and goals behind planning in rural areas.

This document is for informational use only and should not be substituted in lieu of the *Johnson County Zoning and Subdivision Regulations* or *Rural Comprehensive Plan*.

Background

Good rural planning recognizes the limits and opportunities of land to support development. Development constraints often include inadequate infrastructure (e.g. narrow gravel roads, lack of sewers, limited water, etc.). However, good rural planning also recognizes the importance of open space preservation as a future resource, the inefficiencies of uncontrolled growth, and the costliness of premature development to taxpayers at large.

Why Plan?

Community land use plans represent the preferences of the local populace and express “how” and “where” development should occur. Good planning recognizes the need to balance the demands of growth with the need to maintain existing development and at the same time protect the environment and overall quality of life. Good planning facilitates orderly development patterns that maximize opportunities for choice and at the same time reflects the wise expenditure of limited public funds and resources. Towards these ends, community plans establish general guidelines for development.

Johnson County and Sprawl

The *Johnson County Rural Comprehensive Plan* establishes goals, policies, and recommendations for development in the rural, unincorporated area of the county. Both public and private sector decisions affecting the location, design, and quality of development are guided by this Plan.

The primary intent of the Comprehensive Plan is to create a safe and harmonious environment for county residents. The Plan is designed to

- Optimize the potential for future orderly growth,
- Avoid land use conflicts,
- Protect the environment,
- Minimize traffic congestion,
- Locate community facilities where people can best use them; and

The County's *Rural Comprehensive Plan*, along with the County's *Zoning and Subdivision Regulations*, are common tools used to reach these goals.

The Big Picture

Ramifications of Unplanned Development

Improved county roads and freeways promote long distance commuting and often stimulate demand for development in rural areas. Improved access has resulted in the conversion of once remote agricultural lands into scattered pockets of very low-density (less than one dwelling until per acre) residential development.

Typically, development advances beyond the city along highways or rural roads that are narrow and lack shoulders. Development along these roadways may have limited sight distances and few areas for passing (e.g. for school buses). These roads are often bordered by deep open ditches, which further restrict emergency pull-overs.

Country gravel roads, once isolated, often become lined with numerous, large-lot residences. Many of these rural residences lack drinking water from a public source or an adequate water supply and rely on septic systems that may contaminate the surrounding soil.

Rural Sprawl

This type of development has often been referred to as "rural sprawl." Development like this generates a variety of land-use conflicts, as subdivisions encroach on land traditionally associated with rural uses. The dispersal of urban activities in rural areas generally does not mix well with agricultural uses.

Problems with Sprawl

Sprawl is the result of inefficient development. These inefficiencies can establish precedents that support the continuation of the problem. Fragmented or non-contiguous land uses result in higher development and public service costs and taxes (additional schools, school busing, higher road maintenance and improvement expenses, etc.). As these costs increase, an orderly development process becomes more difficult to achieve. Providing public services such as sewer and water to sparsely populated areas is costly to taxpayers. Also, allowing development to occur in rural areas where utilities are unavailable can pose potential health and environmental risks.

While new homes and nonresidential development bring in additional property tax revenue, this revenue increase seldom is sufficient to cover the added costs of providing new public sewers and other infrastructure to support the new development. This scenario is particularly likely where development is spread out supplying limited potential to achieve any economies in the provision of these public services or facilities.

Heavy use of roads designed for low traffic volumes may result in dangerous conditions as well as higher taxes needed to maintain and upgrade the rural road network. Vehicle congestion and unsafe conditions may emerge if the community is unable to “keep up” with the sporadic, uncontrolled development.

Sprawl also impacts the natural environment. The rural area not only serves as an agricultural resource, but also provides a potential reserve of open space for the future. These natural areas reflect the original fabric of the landscape, provide habitat for animals and plants, perform essential hydrologic functions, and have an aesthetic and recreational value as well as providing a potential resource for further development in the future. Pollution from development the eventual elimination of natural areas are the potential consequences of sprawl.

What is Considered “Good” Rural Development?

Good rural development recognizes the importance of balancing human needs with the natural features found within the unincorporated area. These human needs and natural features must be planned in a way that is mutually enhancing while allowing orderly and efficient development. Johnson County’s growth management strategies are designed to accomplish this task.

The Johnson County Rural Comprehensive Plan has established growth management policies for the unincorporated area for the “Urban Fringe,” “Rural,” and “Growth Policy” areas. Each area has its own unique strategy for development.

Planning Areas – (These policy areas are now under consideration for revision as part of the current update of the Comprehensive Plan.)

The Rural Policy Area – Is designated for the majority of unincorporated Johnson County. This area consists primarily of large agricultural tracts interspersed with limited, very low-density residential development. The policies for this area recognize that it is not exclusively agricultural and that existing development patterns may generate demands for minor expansion of non-agricultural uses.

The Growth Policy Area – Applies to areas where a clear pattern of suburban development has occurred even though a substantial portion of the area may remain in unplatted, agricultural properties. The policy for this area recognizes that some land areas will eventually be annexed by neighboring cities in the future.

The Urban Fringe Area – Is closely coordinated with the county and adjacent cities. This policy area includes an area approximately one mile wide outside the boundary of each city that fringes the unincorporated area and is characterized by emerging urban development. Patterns in this area include higher density residential uses and limited concentrations of nonresidential uses.

For More Information

Johnson County Web Page: www.jocogov.org

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