

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION



Setting

Located on the western edge of Minnesota, Clay County is an area known for its natural beauty, vibrant communities, and fertile plains. The county has historically played a diverse role in the Fargo-Moorhead metropolitan area, serving the region with commercial, industrial, community, natural, and agricultural resources. From the wheat fields of Ulen Township to the suburban developments of Moorhead; the lively rail yards of Dilworth to the natural splendor of the tallgrass prairies found in Buffalo River State Park; the growing cities along Highway 10 and I-94 to the serene lakeland communities of Eglon and Parke Township, each area plays a distinct role in the county and the region.

Clay County covers 1,053 square miles, measuring 36 miles from north to south and approximately 30 miles from east to west. The county contains 11 cities and 30 townships. The western boundary of the county abuts the eastern boundary line of North Dakota along the Red River. The Buffalo River flows west-northwesterly through the center of the county, joined by the South Branch Buffalo River west of Glyndon, before discharging into the Red River near Georgetown. The terrain of Clay County consists of flat, rich agricultural land in its western portion to rolling hills, dotted with lakes and ponds in the east.

Purpose and Scope

The 2045 Clay County Comprehensive Plan describes the analysis, future projections, goals and objectives that the county has developed for how decisions will be made over the next 25 years. The 2045 Clay County Comprehensive Plan is an official document adopted by the Board of Commissioners as a guide for decisions about the physical development of the county. The plan sets broad approaches to direct the future growth and development in the areas of land use, transportation, natural resources, housing, and economic competitiveness. For each topic, the plan sets goals, establishes objectives to achieve those goals, and identifies strategies and actions needed for implementation.

County Role

Clay County, like the other 86 Minnesota counties, provides a variety of essential services to foster vibrant, healthy, and safe communities. The role that the county government plays supplements the efforts completed at the federal, state, and local level. Counties support and maintain public infrastructure, transportation, and economic development assets; promote public health; ensure public safety to protect its citizens; maintain public information; and implement a broad array of programs in a cost-effective and efficient manner. These efforts are coordinated with many government partners, including:

- Cities and Townships – Cities and townships provide services at the local level of government in Clay County. These local governments provide essential services similar to those provided by a county, including transportation and utility infrastructure, public safety, and public administration.
- State Agencies – Clay County coordinates with a variety of agencies on different planning efforts. These include agencies such as the Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR), Minnesota Department of Health (MDH), Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA), Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MnDNR). In addition to these, Clay County is a partner in Comprehensive Watershed Management Plans for both the Buffalo-Red River and Wild Rice Watershed Districts. The Clay Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) also serves the role of the County Ag Inspector, Feedlot Officer, and Wetlands Conservation Act Coordinator. These agencies deliver programs and services in accordance with Minnesota Rules and Statutes.



Spring Prairie Township

Plan Overview

Demographic Forecasts

Every five years, the Fargo-Moorhead Metropolitan Council of Governments develops demographic forecast projections for the Fargo-Moorhead metropolitan area. These population, household, and employment projections are used primarily for the allocation of transportation funding in the region but also assist in both city and county planning efforts.

By 2045, it is projected that Clay County will add 25,102 new residents, a 38.4 percent increase compared to the total population in 2020. During this same 25-year period, it is expected that the county will add 9,674 households and 7,569 new job opportunities. Compared to 2020 numbers, this is an increase of 38.2 and 30.0 percent respectively.

Plan Intent

Building upon demographic forecasts and community input, the intent of the comprehensive plan is a statement meant to reflect the community's desire to maintain its important rural and natural character.

To accommodate the needs and services of a projected growth of 25,102 new county residents between 2020 and 2045, while preserving vital agricultural and natural characteristics of the county.



Planning Principles

Clay County strives to maintain a high level of satisfaction from citizens through its quality of services, knowledge, courteousness, and responsiveness. The county is aware that this will be especially important in the future as it preserves the right balance of services, be it transportation, housing, health and human services, corrections services, public safety, housing, and other public services.

The county is also committed to the stewardship of natural resources including soil health, water quality, aggregate resources, open space, and native habitats. In addition, Clay County support historical and cultural amenities such as libraries, arts institutions, and interpretative sites.

Clay County endeavors to support a robust and competitive business climate by providing well-planned, essential infrastructure, maintaining a low tax rate, and assisting in the training and education of skilled individuals.

With regard to growth and land development in the county, Clay County sought to better understand the costs and benefits of different alternatives. These alternatives include the following:

Alternative 1 - Pursue a Restrictive Growth/Land Use Pattern

This alternative would define tight growth boundaries and require all non-farm development to occur within cities, prohibiting these types of uses within rural areas of the county.

Pros:

- Offers maximum protection for agricultural lands
- Provides for planned urban expansion in the most compact, orderly fashion, which lends itself to the greatest efficiencies in the delivery of water, sewer and other public services
- Limits land use conflicts between non-farm residents and agricultural operations in terms of noise, dust, and odor

Cons:

- Doesn't provide landowners, developers, and others many development options
- Most restrictive on economic growth and employment opportunities
- Restrictive growth policies are often cited for inflated land values



Alternative 2 - Pursue a Balanced Growth/Land Use Pattern (PREFERRED)

This alternative would define modest, flexible growth boundaries and allow for non-farm residential, commercial, and industrial development to occur within planned growth areas outside cities, so long as it follows planned development patterns. This alternative would also allow for some non-farm development outside of the planned growth areas with adequate infrastructure, but limit residential densities and direct commercial and industrial growth to areas with adequate infrastructure so as to minimize land use conflicts.

Pros:

- Provides for planned urban expansion
- Provides for orderly and efficient growth
- Provides for agricultural protection
- Provides for landowner and developer flexibility
- Allows for broad economic growth opportunities, while directing it towards desired areas

Cons:

- Doesn't entirely prevent development that may hinder future urbanization
- Since it allows for limited, non-farm residential development in rural areas, some conflicts may still arise between residents and agricultural operations in terms of noise, dust, and odors
- Still places some restrictions on developer and landowner options

Alternative 3 - Pursue a Unrestricted Growth/Land Use Pattern

This alternative would not define growth areas and would allow for non-farm development to occur throughout the county without restriction. This alternative would also set no density limits for residential developments.

Pros:

- Affords landowners, developers the greatest flexibility
- Provides for the greatest economic growth opportunities

Cons:

- Has highest potential for land use conflicts between farm and non-farm uses as well as between residential and commercial/industrial uses
- May reduce protection of agricultural land
- May result in development patterns outside of cities that may hinder their orderly growth
- May result in development patterns where it is difficult or costly to provide water, sewer, and other services in the future

By examining these alternatives, Clay County understands that **Alternative 2** best fits the needs and requirements of the people and communities in which it serves.

Clay County will pursue balanced, sensible growth and land use patterns that allow for modest, flexible growth boundaries along planned development patterns.



Buffalo River at Buffalo River State Park

Plan Elements

The 2045 Comprehensive Plan contains seven chapters that are guided by the county's values, goals, vision, planning principles, and community engagement findings. Some plan elements remain consistent from the previous 2002 comprehensive plan. However, there are new elements and strategies that address land use regulations, transportation corridors, natural resources, and economic resilience. The plan also includes new goals and objectives to address growing issues such as emergency preparedness, healthy communities, and rural transportation options. Below is a summary of each chapter of the plan.

Community Profile

This chapter provides a detailed analysis of Clay County's residents, economy, and important trends that the county will need to consider in upcoming years. It contains key data that lays the framework for the comprehensive plan.

Vision

This chapter outlines the overarching vision for the 2045 Clay County Comprehensive Plan based on outreach efforts with community members and strategic partners.

Land Use

The land use chapter describes physical characteristics of the county as well as measures and methods Clay County uses to maintain land use authority. This section provides guidance for balanced and logical development patterns that preserve existing natural resources, retain the rural character of the county, and provide a high quality of life for residents.

Transportation

A key function of Clay County is to provide a robust transportation system for all users. The transportation system supports the county's land use and development plans, while minimizing the impact on the county's natural resources. This chapter provides policies and strategies that keep the transportation system functioning safely and efficiently across all modes of transportation.

Goals and Objectives

This chapter includes goals and objectives that reflect current issues and opportunities that the county has identified, as well as guidance for how those can be addressed as part of the comprehensive plan.

Implementation

This chapter outlines the tools, funding mechanisms, ordinances, and other plans available to the county that can be utilized to carry out and achieve the goals and objectives for the 2045 Clay County Comprehensive Plan.