

TOWN OF ONALASKA
STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS SUMMARY
SPRING 2004

This summary provides a list of the common themes and most frequently discussed topics in the nearly 25 stakeholder interviews.

1. What are the most important issues in the Town?

- Controlling and planning for growth and development; encouraging new developments to be located near existing infrastructure and services; and stopping sprawl/scattered development. Several interviewees specifically said that an asphalt plant is not appropriate for the Town and is an example of a “lack of planning”; however, a couple of interviewees said industrial – both heavy and light – is appropriate and needed in the Town and in the region, particularly with rail access. Some interviewees said the Town is currently a no-growth or slow-growth. Several people also mentioned the issue of land use conflicts in the Town.
- Ensuring that development on Brice Prairie is compatible with the environment, particularly ground water.
- Protecting groundwater and surface water quality, including Lake Onalaska.
- The transportation system cannot accommodate much additional growth, according to some interviewees, and would need to be improved/expanded to accommodate additional growth, but others disagreed and said adequate capacity exists to serve new developments; a few interviewees said a third access to Brice Prairie is needed.
- Protecting rural character, including preserving the bluffs, prairies, open space and farms.
- Need to work with the school on capacity issues.
- The Town government needs improvement – different people currently represent different “factions”; it is “paralyzed”; needs to access more experienced local leaders in other communities; and needs to both get and keep the public involved in Town affairs.
- Controlling taxes.

2. Describe the Town in the next 20 years.

- Several interviewees expressed opinions resembling the following description: “The Town of Onalaska is a rural community with a light mix of quality residential and commercial areas and a strong commitment to preserving and promoting both working landscapes (crop agriculture, grazing, orchards, etc.) and natural areas (rivers, lakes, prairies, wetlands, woodlands, etc.). New residential and commercial developments blend in with the landscape and incorporate (or provide for) conservancy areas that help preserve scenic beauty, wildlife habitat, the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge, protect the environment (especially our precious groundwater resources), and also contributes to the Town’s focus on outdoor recreation and tourism.”
- Several interviewees said there is a need for commercial and industrial land uses to create more jobs and contribute to the Town’s economy. However, interviewees differed over the location of such development. Some described Brice Prairie as an appropriate location for such development because of the rail corridor; others said it should be located adjacent to existing industrial and commercial areas; and still others said it should be near or along major transportation corridors and/or near the Village and City. Some of the interviewees in this

group also said Brice Prairie should be developed because of its proximity to the La Crosse Metropolitan Area and is the only available flat land remaining within the region suitable for such development; these interviewees believe the Prairie can be developed in an environmentally sensitive way and the transportation system can accommodate the additional traffic.

- Some interviewees discussed the need for design review or architectural standards to ensure new development are attractive and high quality.
- Interviewees were split on whether a PDR program should be considered in the Town to preserve farmland, open space and environmentally sensitive areas.

(Note: There is no consensus on what the Town will be like in 20 years.)

3. What are the Town's opportunities?

- Attract the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to Brice Prairie if protect open space and natural resources.
- Developable land with access to railroads; good commercial industrial locations; the asphalt plant but it is too far away from existing roads; Brice Prairie is the economic future of the Town – it's the only place that will sustain economic development of any size; opportunities for campus-style industrial developments; opportunity for new mixed use development further out on the Prairie around the general store; high tech is great for the area.
- Waterfront and eco-tourism businesses – fully utilize Lake Onalaska, trails, etc.
- Expand the Town center with additional development around Midway with uses such as a restaurant, ice cream store, bicycle facilities.
- Interviewees were divided over whether to create a PDR program.
- To carefully investigate whether it is more cost effective for the Town to preserve open space on Brice Prairie than to provide the infrastructure and services necessary to support further development. The Prairie has not yet been developed to the point where it has crossed the critical development capacity thresholds that will require improved access to Highway 35 and/or urban services (sewer, water, etc.).
- Balance growth and development and open space preservation.
- To identify ways to keep farmers in town; to maintain active working farms.
- Maintain and enhance high quality of life for residents.
- Planning process provides opportunities to create a framework for conservation developments.
- Expand school – community ties.
- Protect bluffs and forests.

4. What are the Town's threats?

- Growth and Development: Development pressure; rapid and too much growth and development; failing to control growth and development – haphazard, unplanned, inappropriate development – particularly on Brice Prairie; density of development; not recognizing the constraints to growth such as transportation and surface water run-off; long term impacts of development on the environment; and developing an asphalt plant.
- Business/Economic Development: Town needs strong stance on businesses. Businesses currently sense hostility. All businesses are scared out right now because of asphalt plant issue. Town Board does not recognize they need revenue from economic development;

- Town Board: need representative/diverse Town Board; naïve in thinking public can drive the planning process. Politics; need continuity of leadership. Small town board. Town Board needs to be more diversified. The make-up has changed, used to be more diverse. Most of them are from Brice Prairie and they don't know what's occurring in the rest of the Town. A town government that is not responsive to the needs and concerns of the residents and does not take the actions necessary to address the Town's issues or take advantage of its opportunities. Residents are stakeholders.
- No growth: several vocal people in the Town are "no growth"; dominant people in the Town want to throw away the Town's economic future by buying development rights; Anti-development people. The attitude that my house is here, but no one else should be allowed to locate here.
- Missing opportunities such as not attracting the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to Brice Prairie.
- General: Town has never had consensus on anything – too many factions. Ignorance – residents who don't take the time to learn about the planning process and what the options are, such as being misinformed about what the PDR program does.
- Poor planning; lack of planning.
- Escalating taxes; allowing industries that cost the Town too much to provide services to or raise taxes.
- Multiple jurisdictions: Parochialism-necessary, but need to work together as a region. Possibility of La Crosse annexing parts of Brice Prairie. Lack of coordination with the County. Roads, water, etc. Uncooperative La Crosse County.
- Natural resource and environmental issues: ground and surface water – shallow groundwater creates threat for contamination; also possibility of failing septic tanks; new developments create more run-off; Natural areas are threatened – losing one small piece can mean losing it all; Migrating birds-the noise and pollution that come with it; need to protect the water, but don't need to go to extremes.
- Not enough green space – not being incorporated into new developments; not enough parks for new residents;
- Safety: roads and traffic, railroads, trucks, bridge behind the school,
- Not preserving quality farmland.

5. **Should growth and development occur in the Town? If so, where?** (The responses in this category have not been summarized; rather, these comments have been categorized.)

- General Comments (location):
 - Should occur adjacent to areas that have already been developed or in planned development areas.
 - Planned, orderly development good.
 - Growth in rural service areas (Midway, grocery store area on Brice Prairie).
 - Good development can co-exist next to wildlife, industry next to lake, etc.
 - Need a planned look at development-no leap-frog growth.
 - Growth should occur in the Village or in the City, not in the Town.
 - Growth should not be scattered along the bluffs.
 - Less productive soil areas should be used for development.
 - Brice Prairie because flat and development there less disruptive than on bluffs.
 - Most development is good, but not all development.

- Keep a balance.
 - Board should respond to this issue-that's why they were elected. They are reasonable people and will make good choices.
 - Some growth and development with adjacent residents having input-avoid traffic bottlenecks.
 - Don't want Holmen to spread. Traffic is horrible there now and it has lost its character because there has been too much housing growth.
 - Cannot develop 10 percent of the Town per year because it will be all developed in 10 years.
 - Room for some growth-smart growth.
 - 90 percent of the Town should stay the way it is now over the next 10 years – some farmland should be transitioned from agriculture to residential to allow farmers to retire.
 - Need to utilize the entire Township for development – not just Brice Prairie; this applies to the extension or creation of new roads as well.
 - Not in Brice Prairie.
 - Across from Menards – should be residential, some nice sized lots (a couple acres) not a wall of houses.
- Commercial, Industrial:
 - Commercial/industrial businesses may be more likely to go the City/Village or to industrial park.
 - Conflicting land uses (residential/industrial) a problem in areas of the Town.
 - Industry in Brice Prairie now that works/meshes well with residential. Small businesses must be there for the long term.
 - Need to make a commitment to the Town.
 - Some type of commercial okay-corridor commercial, light industrial. But, must be very careful with any development on the Prairie. Service stores/shops could do well there.
 - Some small commercial needed for additional tax base.
 - Light industrial development should be allowed if needed, but not the type that costs the Town money.
 - Industrial development should be allowed near the entrance to Brice Prairie and near the railroad to allow large equipment to easily get in and out of the area.
 - Focus on developing existing commercial areas. Attract a beauty shop, restaurant/bar and grill, neighborhood grocery store.
 - More smaller developments should be considered such as fabrication or assembly facilities – light industry is needed.
 - How can you do any industrial development on Brice Prairie without water, sewer, etc. – can only do very small scale developments?
 - Development must be compatible with whatever it is next to and near. Light industrial development is not appropriate and should not be on Brice Prairie. There should not be a bunch of boxes there.
 - Heavy industrial is inappropriate, and any industrial will require additional infrastructure
 - The Town should be conservative and provide for industry as well as housing

- Room on prairie for a nice commercial center. Currently a grocery store, but there is room for more businesses to locate there. Shouldn't be hodge-podge.
 - Industrial vs. light industrial comes down to the state of the roads – prefers light industry
 - Development of high-end commercial – take advantage of the bike trails and the people that they bring.
 - There are a lot of development opportunities on Brice Prairie – it needs industrial development. The City of La Crosse is out of rail access and West Salem only has small rail access – the Brice Prairie rail access is about all that is available and suitable for industrial development.
- Residential:
 - Need more variety of housing for diverse needs.
 - Residential is the best development for the area-a mix of single-family and multi-family.
 - Don't want to see the Town all residential.
 - The Town does not need a lot of residential and industrial development.
 - 70% of the tax base in La Crosse County is residential-this development will continue.
 - Extend subdivision east to the Pedretti property.
 - Elderly housing should be located close to the City
 - Shouldn't allow development of every house that it's possible to "squeeze-in," this would have negative impacts on schools.
 - Multi-family should be located along Hwy 53
 - Prioritize single dwellings to keep it pretty.
 - Some residential development should also be allowed but other types of development cover the costs of residential development.
- Recreation:
 - Possibility for tourism growth.
 - Development along Great River State Trail should occur in a sensitive manner.
 - There is an opportunity to create a tourism-based industry in the Town, particularly in the Midway area with a restaurant, ice cream store, etc.
 - The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service facility should be developed in the Town.
- Size:
 - .5 and .75 acre lots should be allowed adjacent to the Village and City and larger lots should be allowed further into the Town.
 - 20-acre lots are too restrictive. Smaller lots should be allowed.
 - Dense development close to Town center-less dense with variety as move away from center.
 - If new developments are located near the Village or City, the lots should be $\frac{3}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ acre in size so that it will be coordinated with Village and City developments.
 - Don't like seeing small cut-up parcels – prefer city lots for housing with common open space over 2-3 acre parcels with no rhyme or reason – with the right infrastructure this can be done
 - Beautiful lots similar in size to Holmen

- Services and Infrastructure:
 - Consider sewer system to protect water quality, if development is negatively impacting it.
 - New road should be built extending Briggs Road into Brice Prairie. Would help traffic.
 - Growth should occur only if it pays its own way (i.e. it will bring in more in taxes than it costs to provide required services).
 - Growth should occur in areas adjacent to already developed areas that are serviced by the necessary infrastructure (e.g. adequate roads, sewer and water, emergency services, schools, etc.), or in areas where that infrastructure can be efficiently and effectively extended.
 - Should be looking at urban services for the Town such as sewer and water lines, stormwater piping, etc.
 - A couple more through roads are needed to access Brice Prairie because of the railroad. Bridge Road should be extended from the Holmen High School to the Town – it connects the Town and Village as well as being close to the Town of Holland. This road would also allow utilities to be extended into the Town.
 - The current road capacity prevent development from going deeper into Brice Prairie.
 - Should invest in infrastructure along Midway for the tourism industry and for residents – it belongs to everybody.
 - Development should occur in areas already served by infrastructure
 - Road issues – Green’s Coulee offers room for development but another outlet is needed.
 - Development should follow transportation routes.

- Open Space:
 - Want blocks of area protected.
 - Want to protect what’s left of Brice Prairie.
 - PDR program needed in north and east parts of Town.
 - The preservation of farmland and open space should be a consideration in all development decisions.
 - Need incorporate green space into new developments.
 - There is an opportunity for the Town to be a “showcase” for what can be accomplished with conservation development. The Town should pursue alternative approaches to development.
 - Develop property with input from DNR.
 - People want to purchase the development rights of property – but the people who purchase the development rights should have the choice of whether they want to development it or not. If they do not, then they need to maintain it – it cannot become fields of weeds, etc.

- Miscellaneous:
 - Want all of La Crosse County to work together-La Crosse revitalizing downtown neighborhoods.

- Conflicts with suburbanites moving to ranchettes-farm smells, noises, agricultural uses.
- Need to coordinate growth and development in the Town with the Village and City – some of the growth should stay in the Town.
- Rural focus
- Start a new City don't keep adding on – set perimeters
- Development must not be done hodge-podge.
- There should be a transition from farming to development with control of wastewater and waste in general – it would be good for everyone, such as the proposed Mathy development.

6. Other comments, questions.

Growth and Development

- Feels Town has been okay toward commercial/business interests.
- Water table issues on Brice Prairie-development is a big deal there.
- As you develop Brice Prairie, you lose the appeal because more development means more traffic, fewer open spaces, etc.
- La Crosse should consider annexing parts of Brice Prairie – Lake Onalaska is artificial and should not be classified as such. La Crosse supports the industrial development on Brice Prairie.
- Many of the people in the Town who raise the pollution issue from more development are the polluters from the failing septic systems, the quality soils they built on, etc.
- Would sell land to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service instead of developers if paid a fair price.
- Variety of factors affect development along State Trail. Prairie, Black River bottom, Trempealeau-small town feel. People want to feel they've "gotten away"-don't want urban feel.
- Want a win/win situation with the asphalt plant.
- Smart growth law is great for private property rights-gives more local control.
- Businesses won't go out of their way to come to the Town-the County and La Crosse have made extra efforts to be pro-business.
- Need market analysis for other commercial developments; and these developments must be sensitive to ground water. The industrial zoned lands were rezoned against the Town's wishes in the first place.
- Should coordinate the locating of a new U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service with the Town's planning process.
- Midway Lumber has grown in volume 10 times in the past 15 years.

Taxes and Services

- Money is tight at all levels-people don't want higher taxes. Development does not solve the tax problem, e.g. recent school referendum.
- Services are great.
- Good roads, plowing, etc.
- Taxes are very reasonable and have only increased out of necessity.

- Contamination at the old landfill a problem in past and contributed to higher taxes.

People, Planning & Participation

- Residents should use this planning process to get their opinion out there, even if extreme.
- Glad to see Town is making effort to plan.
- People willing to make sacrifices, e.g. Jason Gilman in Onalaska, Village of Holmen-great communication, open to calls/discussion.
- Brice Prairie is a problem-need to get everybody involved in the planning process.
- The town needs to make a concerted effort to encourage public participation in the planning process. This means making sure that public participation opportunities are advertised well in advance (3-4 weeks) of an event, and having citizen committees to be involved in the town's planning process--both in helping guide the process and in evaluating the plan itself.
- People are apathetic overall in the Town, but the Brice Prairie residents turn out the people for the elections.
- Public process must be thorough, it can be difficult to get people's attention, but it's very important that everyone has a chance to participate.
- Important to talk to everyone-right now many people are afraid to speak up.

Open Space, Environment & Recreation

- Possible changing use patterns for State Trail-ATV use possible. Will affect area, trail use, development, etc.
- The Brice Prairie Conservation Club facility is a great asset to the community – it provides space for community events and meetings.
- The soil in Brice Prairie is so pervious – can stick a hose in a hole in the ground and the hole will never create a puddle.
- Need to invest in nature.
- There is very little wildlife on Brice Prairie.
- If the Town preserves it's natural areas many benefit, especially surrounding communities, who will share the costs?
- Open space on Brice Prairie is not accessible to a lot of people.
- Halfway and Sand Lake Creek are two major drainage areas.

Miscellaneous

- Education is very important.
- Interaction between the communities and educational system must occur.
- Arcadia is a beautiful little city with good schools that aren't too full.