

6. Agriculture

Future Role of Agriculture in Polk County

Agriculture as an economic activity has influenced historical development patterns in Polk County and will continue to influence future development patterns. Although the number of farms in Polk County declined by 14% from 1997 to 2002, farm size increased by 10% and the number of acres in production was fairly stable¹.

The presence of very high-quality soils in the north, east and central areas of the County allows agriculture to continue to be economically viable. Lower-quality soils in the southeast support decreasing agricultural activity. In addition to its role as an economic base activity, agriculture provides rural lifestyle options in Polk County. Open space needs are also met through the agriculture landscape. Future residents and visitors to Polk County will be greeted by large areas of agricultural landscape, as they are today.



Agriculture is the most widespread land use in Polk County, and the first impression for many visitors

Future Land Use and Economic Activity

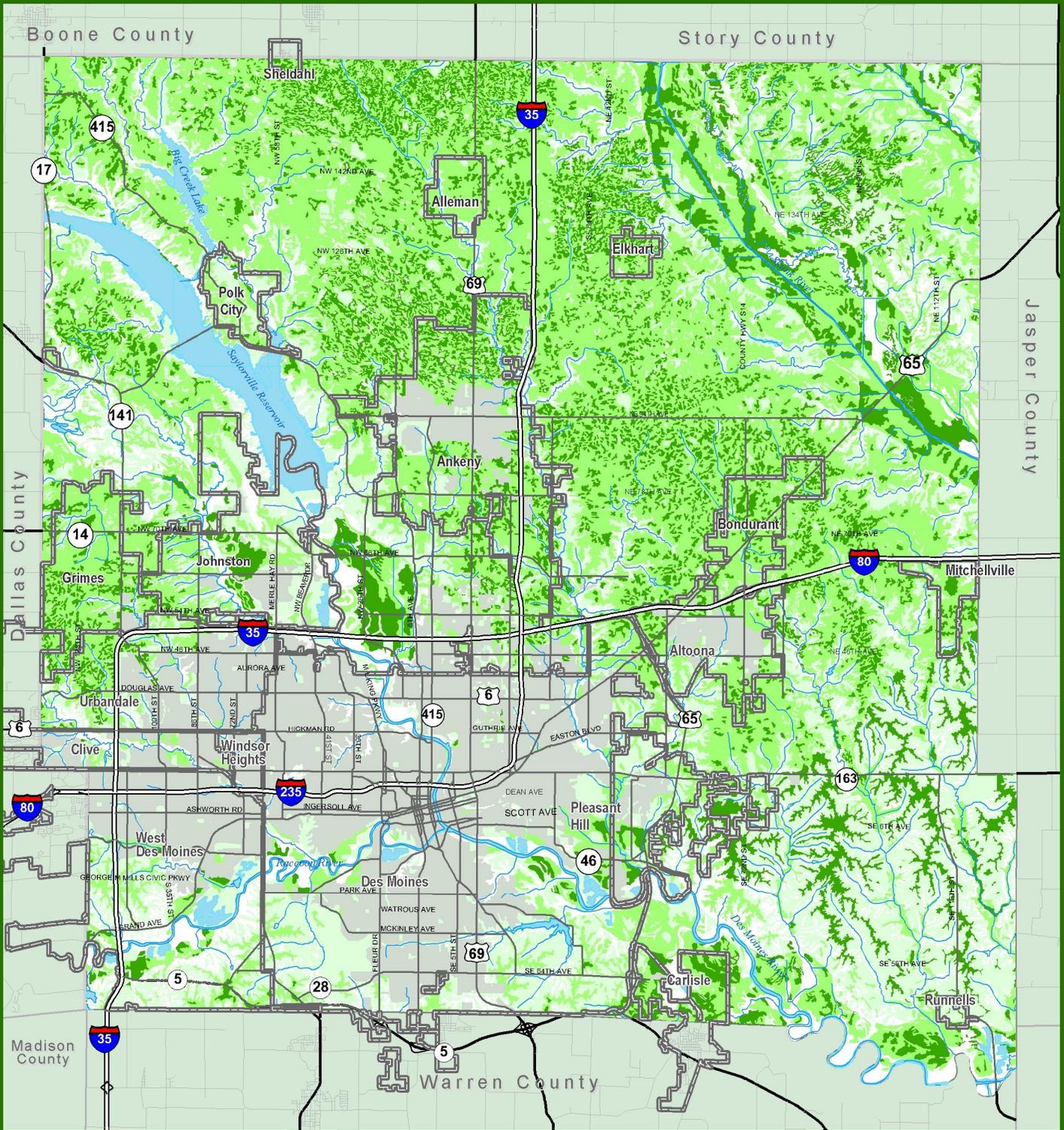
The future of agriculture as an economic activity in Polk County includes three trends. First, farm families are frequently supplementing farm income with non-farm sources of income from “second jobs².” Second, agriculture in Polk County is becoming more “metropolitan” in nature. “Metropolitan” agriculture means smaller farms with higher crop margins³. It also means the conversion of farmland to development as land values rise near urban areas. Three, traditional agriculture continues in areas further in distance from the core cities and with higher-quality agricultural soils. Figure 6-1, *Corn Suitability Ratings*, shows the areas of Polk County with the highest quality agricultural soils.

Future land use in Polk County includes areas that reflect both the continuation of traditional agriculture and the planned conversion of farmland to development. Agriculture will remain the dominant land use in the northeast, the area most distant from the urban core and with the best soils. In addition, agriculture will remain dominant in the easternmost part of the County and in areas northwest of the Saylorville Reservoir. “Agriculture” is the largest future land use zone in

¹ *2002 Census of Agriculture: Iowa State and County Data*, Volume 1, Geographic Area Series, Part 15; United States Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service; June 2004.

² Iowa Farm Bureau, “Metropolitan Agriculture,” Powerpoint presentation, Aug. 2, 2005.

³ Ibid.



Iowa Corn Suitability Rating (CSR)

- CSR 90 to 100
- CSR 80 to 89
- CSR 50 to 79
- CSR under 50
- Urban Soil



0 2 4
Miles

Prepared by
URS

Figure 6.1

Data Sources: NRCS, USDA, Polk Co

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terms of area. "Agricultural Transition" areas are expected to eventually transition to urban uses in areas near expanding cities in the central and southeast portions of the county. However, during the time frame of this plan (2005-2030) it is expected that most of these areas will remain agricultural.

During the planning period for the alignment of the Northeast Beltway transportation corridor, agriculture will remain the primary allowed land use. Agricultural areas and Agricultural Transition areas are indicated on Figure 3.2, the *Land Use Plan* map. The intended density in these areas is one dwelling unit per 35 acres.

The designation of land use areas that are primarily agricultural minimizes the potential for incompatible land uses in close proximity. Over 127,000 acres are designated as Agriculture, and over 16,000 acres as Agricultural Transition on the Land Use Plan map, totaling over 60 percent of the unincorporated area. Agricultural activities produce off-site impacts such as noise, dust and smells. Agricultural activities are geographically tied to area with productive soils; they cannot be located anywhere. Therefore, land uses that are incompatible with the off-site impacts of agriculture, such as dense urban areas, should be located in areas where agriculture is not the primary land use.

Polk County will continue to support commercial, industrial and transportation land uses that are critical to the continuation of agriculture. These include:

- Support for rural elevators and rail lines, and transportation infrastructure connections between farms and elevators and rail lines
- Support for recruitment and location of agricultural research businesses and value-added processing industries
- Support of agricultural supply and maintenance businesses in accessible locations in the rural areas of the county

Agriculture in Polk County is supported by the proximity of high-quality agricultural areas to the urban core. This proximity provides more opportunities for synergy between agricultural production and agricultural processing. It also provides broader marketing opportunities than more remote agricultural areas. In addition to access to large corporate markets, there are opportunities for direct marketing to consumers and the food service industry. Direct marketing to consumers could occur through farmer's markets, community supported agriculture, sale of products at point of production, and farm tourism such as wineries, corn mazes, and seasonal sales. Access to the food service industry could include marketing of locally-grown foods in local stores and sales to local restaurants.



New housing has been constructed in many agricultural areas.

Agricultural Goals and Policies

Chapter Two identified two county-wide goals, with associated policies, that directly relate to agriculture. In order to meet these goals, Polk County has identified several policies, also included in Chapter Two. The Agricultural Goals and Policies are repeated below. After each policy below, suggestions for programs and actions to move toward the policy are included.

Agriculture Goal

Polk County will protect agricultural practices in areas with prime soils and viable agricultural interests, and will work with agricultural producers, cities, and non-agricultural landowners to minimize conflicts between agricultural and non-agricultural land uses.

Policy 1 - Agricultural Land Protection

Large tracts of prime soils are critical to maintaining agricultural practices in Polk County. The County will encourage stewardship of prime agricultural soils and will continue to protect areas most suitable for agricultural production, by encouraging more compact growth in and around municipalities and through development regulations that protect agricultural activities.

Polk County will protect agricultural land and implement the land use plan map by establishing zoning districts in designated agricultural areas where agriculture is the primary purpose of the district and minimum densities are 35 acres per dwelling unit.

The County will adopt criteria for rezoning requests from an agricultural district to a residential district. These criteria will emphasize the possible impacts of a non-agricultural development on agricultural activities and land uses.

Polk County will also protect agricultural land through the designation of land use areas appropriate for municipal expansion. These are areas around existing municipalities where utility and transportation infrastructure is available or planned to become available.

Policy 2 – Agricultural Practices Protection

Minimizing nuisances requires that incompatible land uses be separated. Polk County will protect agricultural practices as the primary and preferred land use in the designated agricultural areas to allow continued private economic investment in agricultural production.

In addition to agricultural zoning districts, the County should consider aiding in the creation of Agricultural

Areas under Iowa Code Section 352.6. These areas are voluntarily created by landowners and result in the long-term protection of land as agricultural land. Agricultural Areas could be promoted in areas designated for long-term agricultural use on the *Future Land Use Map*.

Section 352.6 Agricultural Areas 300 acres in size or greater are exempt from special assessments for infrastructure improvements when a road or utility passes through or next to the designated property. Iowa Code Section 352.10 allows the County to exempt properties of smaller size. In March 2004, Polk County adopted a Joint City-County Water Sewer Policy that provides exemptions for smaller agricultural parcels for public sewer and water projects. Section 7.32 of this policy exempts all but one acre of single family and agricultural parcels of five acres or greater from acreage assessments. Linear frontage assessments are capped at 125 feet. The acreage and frontage assessments are abated until the property is developed.

A "rural characteristics" notification program should be considered for all non-farm development in areas designated as Agriculture on the *Future Land Use Map*. As a condition of approval, landowners proposing non-farm development, including non-farm residential development, will be required to acknowledge the potential off-site impacts of farming. This notice will be recorded on the abstract for the non-farm property. Off-site impacts may include: noise, lights, dust, slow-moving machinery, and odors. Since agriculture is the primary land use in Agricultural areas, agricultural practices should be protected to the fullest extent possible. Several counties in Iowa have already implemented rural notification programs.

In addition to the Agricultural areas, a notification program should be considered for areas designated as Agricultural Transition on the *Future Land Use Plan*. Agricultural Transition areas are areas expected to remain in agricultural use during the planning period (twenty-five years). Because of the installation of public sewer lines in these areas during the life of this plan, Agricultural Transition areas are expected to develop at urban densities after the planning period (twenty-five to fifty years). A term notification program would require non-farm developers to sign a waiver that would expire when the area is zoned for urban densities.

In addition to a County notification program, Polk County should support state legislation for the protection of farmers against nuisance lawsuits.



New rural residents may not anticipate agricultural vehicles and practices.

Policy 3 - Rural Protection

Polk County will protect the rural character of agricultural landscapes and communities by directing non-agricultural growth to municipalities, discouraging municipal expansion inconsistent with the land use plan, and allowing rural communities to remain economically sustainable.

In addition to establishing agricultural and municipal transition districts, Polk County will investigate and, if viable, develop three programs that implement the Rural Protection Policy. The first program is a purchase of development rights (PDR) program to compensate agricultural landowners for placing their land under permanent protection as agricultural land.

PDR programs are used in the Midwest, and throughout the country, to protect agricultural land in areas of growth pressure. The rights to develop land for housing are permanently removed in exchange for a monetary payment. The land is dedicated to agricultural uses and the title to the land remains with the private landowner. Future landowners are restricted from developing land where development rights have been removed. Although programs differ, the amount of the payment in many programs is equal to the difference between the market value of the land for development and the market value of the land with the development rights removed, i.e. its agricultural value. Local PDR programs are supported by the Federal Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program (FRPP). The FRPP provides millions of dollars in matching funds each year to over 25 states.

Another program to investigate is the creation of property tax incentives for farmers to remain in farming rather than develop land for housing. An example of a property tax incentive for agricultural land protection is the recently adopted Wisconsin Agricultural Area Tax Increment Financing (TIF) program [see Wisconsin Statutes Chapter 60.85]. The program allows local governments to work with farmers to designate agricultural TIF areas. Agricultural TIF areas may be designated for agricultural manufacturing areas, agricultural tourism districts, or other areas with value-added agricultural activities. Within these areas tax increments are invested in infrastructure or programs that support agricultural production. These investments could include road improvements or funding for a purchase of development rights program.

A tax increment financing program would be dependent on increasing tax revenues resulting from the projects developed in the tax increment area. Development of

an agricultural manufacturing project or value-added agricultural businesses would more clearly produce tax increment, whereas a tax increment area with no change in farming practices would not.

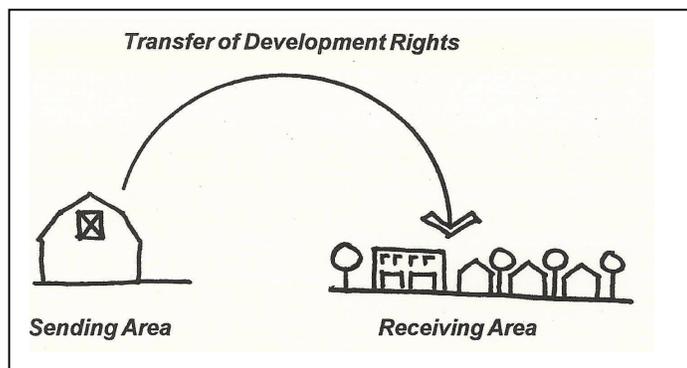
Transfer of development rights (TDR) programs, used throughout the country to protect agricultural areas, are another program to be considered by Polk County. Unlike purchase of development rights programs where development rights are extinguished, TDR programs move the right to develop from the agricultural land to another piece of land, usually in an urbanizing area. The development right is still used, but it is used in a location where development is desired, rather than agricultural and other areas where development is not desired. TDR programs are often used where there is a landowner expectation of development based on past zoning. TDR programs allow the future protection of agriculture but still allow landowners to receive monetary compensation for their development expectations.

TDR programs establish a “sending zone” where development rights are to be transferred from, usually important agricultural areas or areas with other important natural resources. A “receiving zone” is also established where development is desired, usually areas to be developed or redeveloped at urban densities. TDR programs often require developments in receiving zones to acquire development rights from the sending zones. The transfer benefits the receiving zone by establishing open space in close proximity and by maximizing public investment in urban infrastructure. Polk County may consider a TDR program, particularly in the Southeast area where landowner expectations for development in rural areas are high and where possible receiving zones are nearby as cities expand.

All these rural protection programs – PDR, agricultural TIF and TDR programs – would require significant investigation and, if the County chose to pursue them, significant time for program development.

Economic Growth and Agriculture Goal

Polk County will encourage continued sustainable growth of the County's agricultural land uses through identifying appropriate locations for agricultural and non-agricultural business growth, encouraging innovation in agricultural production and market development, and linking economic investment with the resources that make the investment competitive.



Policy 1 - Value-Added Economic Development

Agricultural production creates more economic value for County residents and businesses when used to support local manufacturing investment. Polk County will encourage commercial and industrial investments in agricultural value-added products and create partnerships to expand and foster growth of new production and marketing efforts.

Polk County will encourage economic development staff to assist farmers in developing connections to local markets and developing new marketing opportunities. Economic development efforts should also include recruitment and locational assistance for agricultural research businesses and value-added processing industries.

To support value-added agriculture, Polk County will develop zoning provisions that allow farmers to develop direct, on-farm sales to consumers and allow farm tourism activities such as farm wineries and equestrian parks. The zoning provisions could include expanding permitted uses and creating specific development standards for direct sales, pick-your-own, and farm tourism uses.

Policy 2 - Community Economic Development

Rural commercial development should support rural communities and limit leapfrog commercial development. Polk County will encourage compact commercial development in municipalities within agricultural areas to enhance rural vitality, and will discourage non-agricultural commercial development in rural areas.

The creation of zoning districts that enhance small rural communities will achieve this policy. Limiting commercial uses in agricultural zones is also necessary to direct commercial activities to rural towns and villages.

Policy 3 – Agriculture and Transportation Infrastructure

Location of transportation infrastructure, the capacity of roads to handle agricultural needs, and management of road use are important for keeping agriculture viable in the County. Polk County will guide development and expansion of transportation in agricultural areas so as to enhance the viability of agricultural practices in regard to siting of new roads, improvement and maintenance of existing roads, and creation or maintenance of rail transportation options.



Local gravel road serving agricultural area.

Polk County will plan for investment in transportation infrastructure connections between farms and local farm support services such as elevators and other markets

Roadway design and redesign should recognize the need for agricultural equipment to share the road with other vehicles. Provisions should be made for tractors and cars to safely move on the same road. Expanded shoulders, slow vehicle passing lanes, "Share the Road" signage, and other design features should be incorporated into new and existing roadways in agricultural areas and in primary "farm to market" routes.

Polk County will work to protect and expand the inter-modal transportation network necessary to support the agricultural economy. Protecting existing rail lines is a critical element of this inter-modal network.



Elevator storage facilities depend on adequate rail transportation