

A Place Called Fitchburg

Thomas D. Hovel, City Planner



Unless otherwise noted images from Fitchburg Planning files

Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan wrote: "What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value." This brief talk will be about the place that is Fitchburg and how it has been formed over time.

Swan Creek Sewing Circle



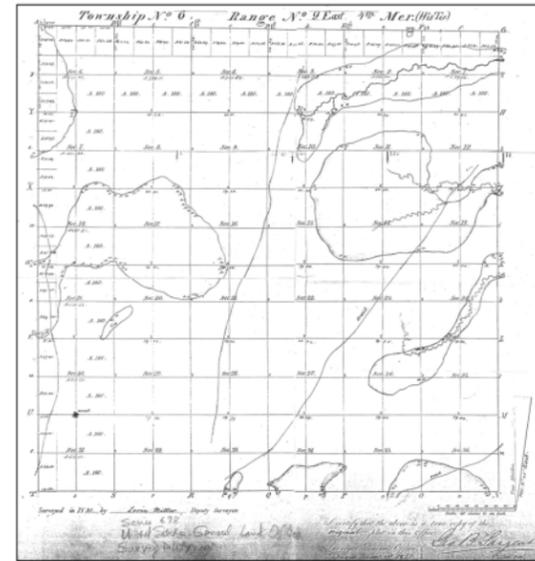
Swan Creek Sewing Circle Members, July 7, 1937

Source: fitchburghistory.org

Some of you may wonder what the Swan Creek Sewing Circle has to do with land planning? Formed in 1915 the women of the Swan Creek Sewing Circle made quilts, clothes for the mentally handicapped, and bandages for use by the Red Cross in the two world wars.

Those who plan the city have the land that is altered and reformed by human activity to create a Fitchburg quilt.

Fitchburg-1833 Survey Map



Before human settlement, the space that is Fitchburg was molded by the Wisconsin glacier, with terminal and recessional moraines, drumlins and outwash plains giving body to the landscape.

In 1833 Fitchburg was basically a piece of fabric, undeveloped but for some Indian Trails.

William Vroman, who with his brothers George and Joseph were the first settlers of European descent on the Fitchburg prairie, is quoted in [Fitchburg: a History](#) as stating: "It is one of the best agricultural towns in the county, with very little or no waste lands, about equally divided between prairie and oak openings. The soil is very rich and climate healthy." Interestingly, today, these same geographic and natural features, the moraines as an example, are often used as reasons to develop property.

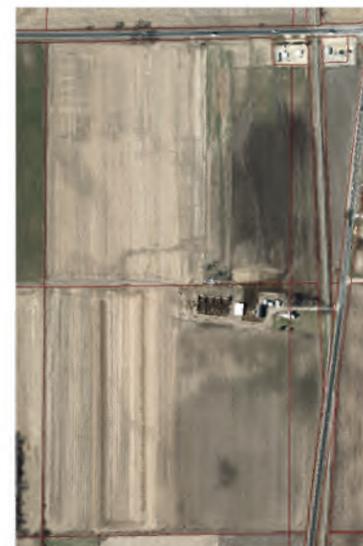
John Stoner Land



Left: Stoner Land Patent

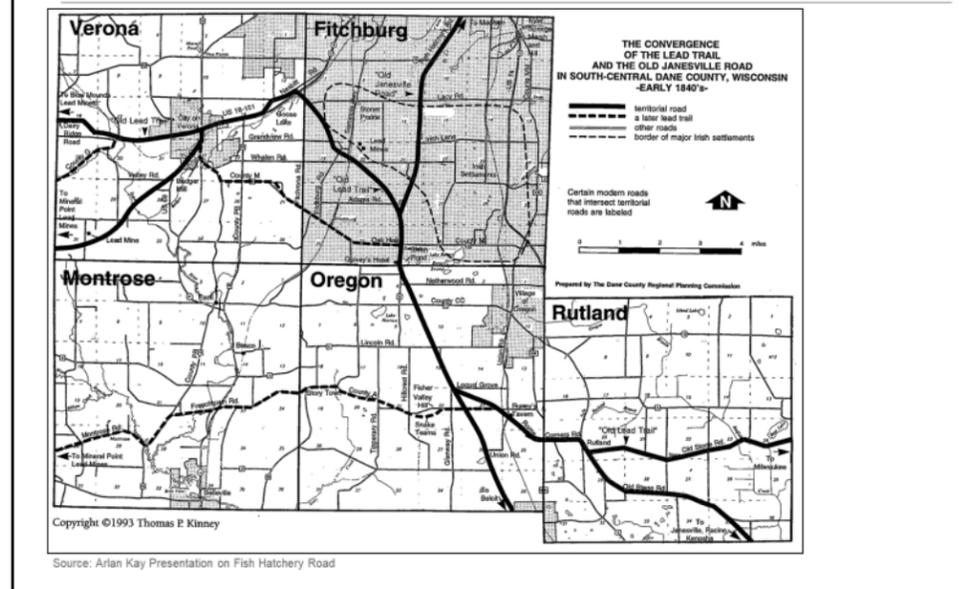
Right: 2014 air photo of area

Sources: BLM website, Fitchburg GIS



Before the settlement by the Vroman's, John Stoner, according to [Fitchburg: A History](#), was, in 1837, the first to cultivate the deep rich soils of Fitchburg, and the third to do so in Dane County. He would purchase land in section 17 in December of 1840. His farming activity would be the start of Fitchburg's rich agricultural history, at least in a Western-centered world view. It would be the beginning of a sense of place, but also a patch or piece on the Fitchburg quilt that is the land.

Fitchburg—Crossroad and Irish Settlement



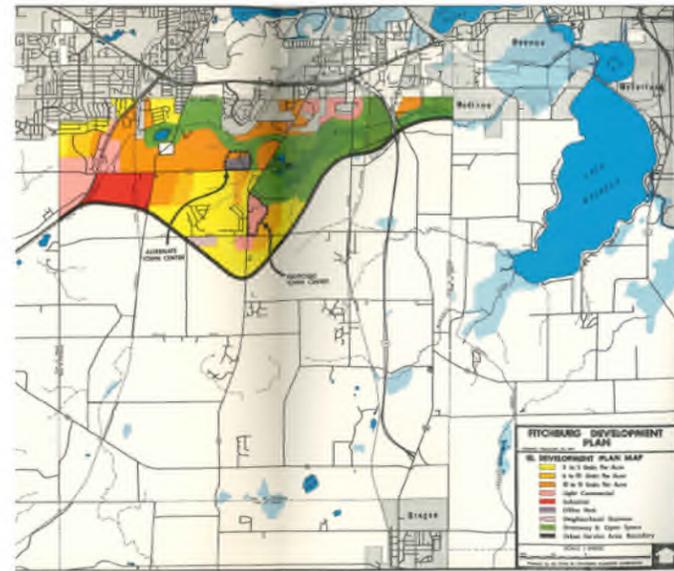
The Irish were the predominant ethnic group to settle Fitchburg, and their impact is recognized in the city logo as it mimics a clover. This map, shows the historic roads and trails and Thomas Kinney's area of Irish settler concentrations. The wave of Irish immigration would correspond to the potato famine, or as in the case of the Fox family, to get away from English persecution. Of course, in 1840 Fitchburg was known as Greenfield. It was not until 1853, to avoid confusion with Greenfield in Milwaukee County, that the name was changed.

Fitchburg—1937 Air Photo



Let us move ahead 97 years to what may be the first compiled air photo for Fitchburg. What is striking is the mosaic that is the farmland of Fitchburg—Fitchburg’s version of an American quilt. The fields, wetlands and woods are the fabric, and roads and streams are the quilting thread. The women of the Swan Creek Sewing Circle created quilts out of fabric and thread, but their husbands, brothers and fathers, and yes it was mainly men who did the field work at the time, according to agricultural historian John Shover, created the quilt of the land. The Nine Springs Creek corridor and its related wetlands are easily visible-- from Fish Hatchery Road to Syene Road. One could say that Fitchburg was a place, defined by its agricultural residents farming the rich soil commented by Mr. Vroman.

Land Use—1974 Plan



Fitchburg adopted its first major land use plan in 1974. This plan set forth the urban service concept. With the advent of exclusive agriculture zoning a few years later, the idea of growth in an urban service area became a mainstay for development. The conflict at the boundaries of different landscape types began, or at least became more pronounced, in the 1970's as Fitchburg changed from a rural community to a suburb. Between 1970 and 1980 Fitchburg added 69 acres of development to accommodate a population increase of 7,300, which works out to almost 105 persons per acre. The urban service area is the means by which the city guides development to not only assist in the economical provision of public services, but also to retain a rural component to Fitchburg.

Conflict at Boundary of Landscape Types

Block to urban sprawl studied

In the article on this page, reporter Peter D. Fox explores the concept of transferable development rights as a tool to preserve open space and rural lands from urban encroachment.

By PETER D. FOX
of the Times Herald Staff

A special committee of the House County Board now will study a bill — similar to zoning — for governing open space lands.

The concept, transferable development rights, is new to the Midwest but has been used in various forms in Europe and is being studied in the South, too, Fox said.

Transferable development rights are an alternative to zoning, but both are aimed to accomplish the same thing — to prevent urban encroachment on rural land through a forced land use change.

The difference between the two is that transferable rights are programs that allow the use of property to be moved from one place to another.

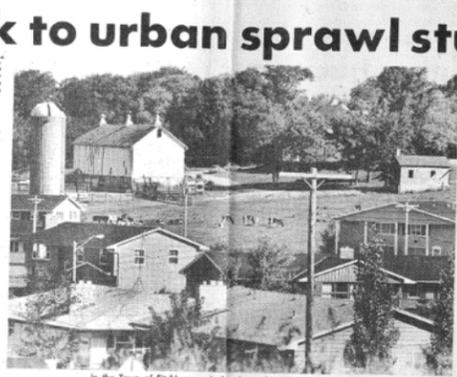
"Transferable development rights would be a tool just like zoning to implement a community's land use plan," Fox said.

"Just as the program, you have to identify the area to be developed and the area to be protected. Both zoning and transferable development rights work best when you have a land use plan," he said.

"If all people are disappointed with zoning because their first zoning hasn't been as effective as they would like to see, one of the problems with zoning is that people have incentive to change zoning for development."

"People who are interested in zoning can't, in a community, usually buy to compensate people who are interested in rural open space."

There are many ways to do it, a transferable development rights program, Fox said, but each does things differently.



In the Town of Fitchburg and elsewhere, the city invades farmland.

—Times Herald photo by L. Roger Lauer

"The rural government or some sort of government should have a plan to be developed or preserved. Landowners in the preservation area would be given development rights certificates, and developers who wish to build in development areas would have to purchase development certificates from landowners in the preservation area."

"In this way, preservation area landowners are compensated for not being allowed to develop their land," Fox said.

Proponents of transferable development rights stress that to the protection of agricultural and rural land from urbanization and high land prices in markets for competing uses.

State voters last year approved a constitutional amendment to allow property owners on farm land to be determined on other than market value.

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Barrows said a transferable development rights plan could fall on either side of the law.

"A transferable development rights system could fall on both the good development side, he said. "On the other hand, the law is in the open."

Barrows said the plan would be used to help rural areas, but he would have the development rights and an owner would be required to transfer them.

Barrows said the plan of rights is not a new concept and normally is used with mineral and water rights.

Barrows pointed out the potential variation in a system of transferable development rights under the law — zoning and open space.

"That's the problem with transferable development rights is that there have been a lot of people making programs, but none has put the plan on the ground to see if it really works," he said.

"One big problem is how to make adjustments over time. This is something people haven't worked out," he said.

A metropolitan area zoning board would be required to have transferable development rights in some zoning code, but he would have been there to be available to help developers and preservation landowners, he said.

"A more general problem is to make it work."

"If Madison had a transferable development rights program and had had it sooner, I would be willing to see them would be a whole bunch of developers and speculators not looking for development rights to buy."

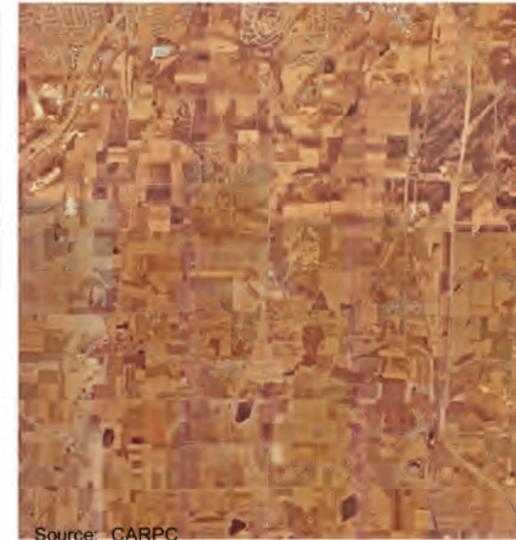
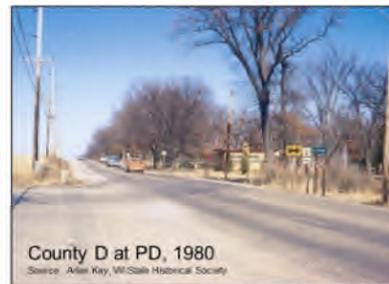
"A big problem is how to make adjustments over time. This is something people haven't worked out," he said.

"There is nothing wrong with the program, but we just don't know if it works."

Source: WI State Journal Oct. 19, 1975

There was present in the past, as well as today, a constant interplay between agricultural land and development which evokes a series of emotions in the populace. Fitchburg by its very geography is in the midst of this on-going suburban-rural tension. This tension, as UW Historian William Cronon notes, occurs at the boundaries of different landscape types. Fitchburg was the first incorporated municipality in the state to have a farmland preservation zoning district, and it is the only one in the state to have a SmartCode zoning district. This constant tension, ironically, and in my opinion, gives a sense of place by its combination of farmland next to suburban land.

Fitchburg—1980 Air Photo



Six years before I began my employment with Fitchburg, you can see scattered rural subdivisions and suburban development in a not too orderly process. The most concentrated areas of development lie near the Madison border in the north along Fish Hatchery Road and by Verona Rd. Between 1980 and 2010 the municipality has added on average about 4,500 persons a decade.

With no set core from which to grow, Fitchburg was growing in a suburban, and somewhat haphazard fashion. As a town, it had lacked a downtown that was typically critical in providing that sense of place for communities. It may have lacked a physical downtown, but there was a sense of place as the residents would move to form their own city to avoid annexations by the city of Madison, and to control their destiny. Interestingly, the town board used high density development at the northern edge to help calm Madison expansion to the south.

Planning and Zoning--1986

Fitchburg ST

Vol. 12, No. 24 30 cents Thursday, June 19, 1986

Growth creates need for zoning position

By Al Pavlik

Fitchburg's first fulltime zoning administrator went to work this month.

Tom Hovel of San Pablo started work for the city June 2 as a fulltime zoning administrator and city planner.

He took over zoning tasks that Assistant Bill Somers had been handling as well as planning work.

Photography workshop

Put nature's beauty-quest in focus with your camera this summer with tips and techniques learned in a University of Wisconsin-Madison Communication Progress workshop beginning June 11.

The intensive "Nature Photography: Summer Workshop" will provide individualized instruction for beginners and advanced photographers.

The extension workshop will meet 7 p.m. - 4 p.m. Saturday, June 11; and 10 a.m. - 4 p.m. Sunday, June 22; and 7-10 p.m. Friday, June 27. The classroom will be in Level Hall, 650 Langdon St.

The instructor will be Dave

for which the city had been hiring expensive outside consultants.

"This is the first real zoning position we've added since becoming a city," said Mayor Jeanne Hovel. "Before we were a city, the county did the zoning. Since January of 1984 we've administered our own zoning."

"Our assessor started doing the zoning, too, so a total lack to me how much time and work was involved," she said. "Bill was a good person to start doing the zoning because he is knowledgeable and respected, and provided a nice transition."

"But he said it was too much of a job by itself," Hovel said. "And we had been hiring a lot of outside consultants at \$30 and \$40 an hour for planning work, there is a tremendous amount of work administering the TIF districts. So, we decided there was plenty of work for one person and we decided to create the zoning administrator position."

"The growth in Fitchburg has taken off the walls," said the mayor. "From 1982-85 I think we handled two new plans. Currently we have four. Partly because of the lower interest rates, there's a lot more building going on."

"Also, you look how far Madison has gone to the west, the north (Fitchburg is the next place this growth) will go."

"Creating a position that deals with development was essential at this time of the year."



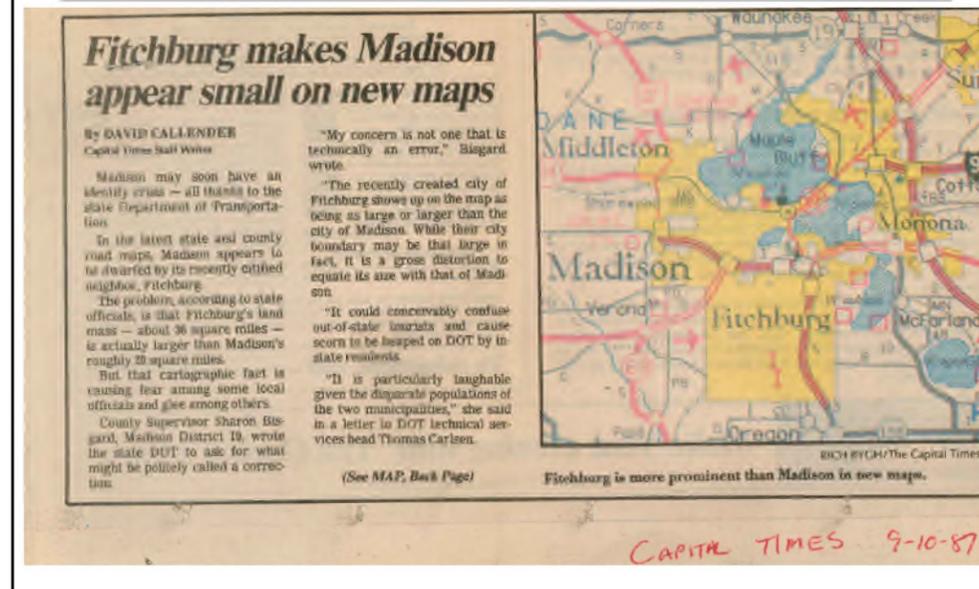
New zoning administrator

Tom Hovel looks over a map in his office at city hall, where he started work earlier this month as Fitchburg's first fulltime zoning administrator and city planner.

"Municipal had challenges with zoning ordinance and Hovel Hovel is excited about working with the TIF districts."

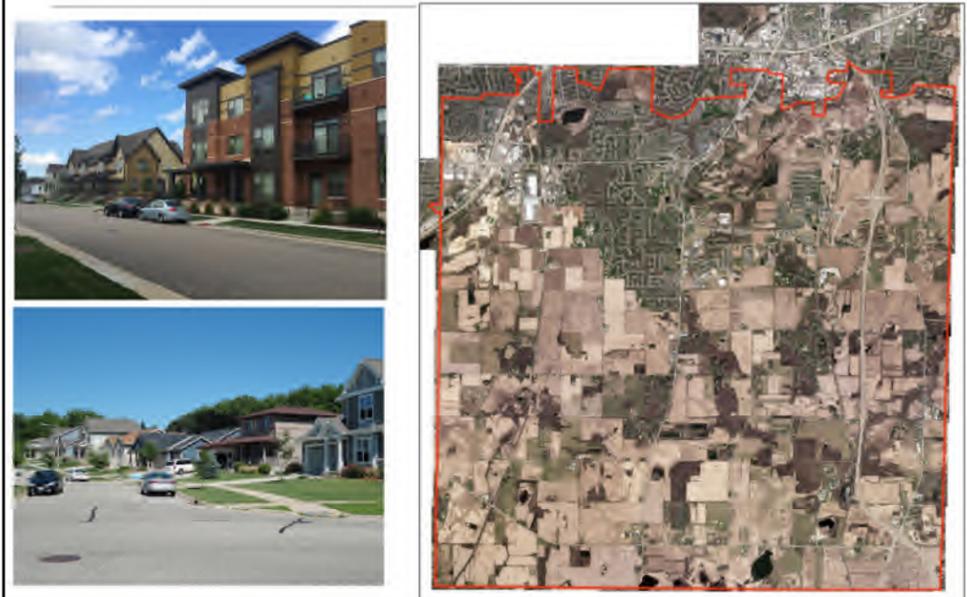
Recognizing the growth explosion, the city hired its first full time planner and zoning administrator. That is me at an earlier age and time.

Town to City



Becoming a city had other consequences, some of which made headlines. Such as the first state highway map to be prepared following Fitchburg's incorporation in 1983.

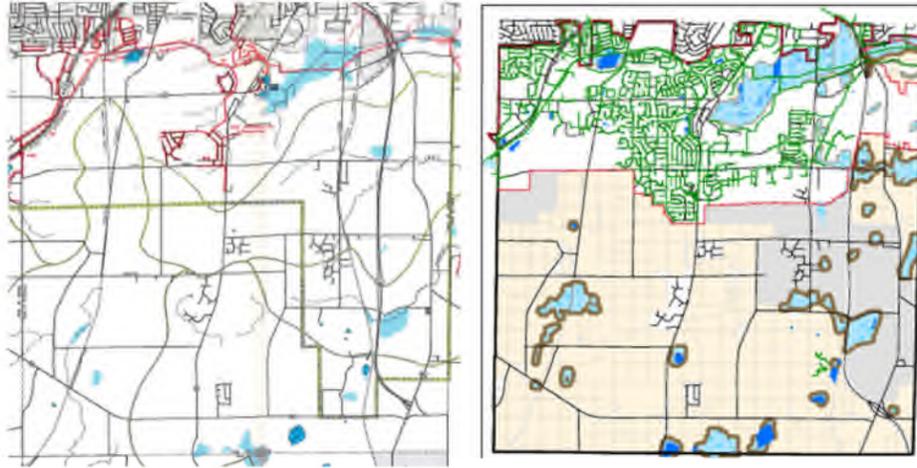
Fitchburg—2017 Air Photo



By 2017 major developments have remained concentrated in the urban area, with farms interspersed by the rural subdivisions of decades earlier. In 2017, Fitchburg's population reached near 28,000 persons.

Fitchburg still struggles with identity, sometimes thinking that one unified school district, or a post office would solve the issue. However, place is more than a single building or institution. Place is created, in part, by a form of development that is not just to provide services, but to want to make people congregate and meet, to be part of what is valued.

Sanitary Sewers, 1974 and 2016



One measure of urbanism is the provision of sanitary sewer and water. A comparison of sanitary sewer lines clearly indicate the extent of urban growth, in this case over a period of 42 years. These lines represent the thread used as new layers of fabric were pieced onto the fabric of the land that is Fitchburg.

Contentious Issue



THE CAPITAL TIMES

Wednesday afternoon, July 22, 1987

Madison, Wisconsin

35¢

What's gray and hard and coming to Fitchburg?

By SHARON L. SCHEMELING
Capital Times Staff Writer

FITCHBURG — Residents and tree lovers have yearned for the future. The lush, green, concrete-free Fitchburg yards someday will be only the stuff for an "I remember when..." story by the city historian.

Sidewalks are coming. You remember — those gray hard surfaces that kids scrape their knees on and folks run and walk on.

There are 72 miles of roadway in Fitch-

burg and only about three miles of it has accompanying sidewalk. City planners want to change that.

Fitchburg Plan Commission members spent three hours Tuesday night poring over a 12-page draft of a sidewalk policy.

The draft describes only generally what kinds of streets most need sidewalks. It does not tell how the sidewalks will be paid for.

About two years ago several residents petitioned the City Council for sidewalks. More recently, residents told council mem-

bers that children play in busy streets because there are no sidewalks.

While Fitchburg is not in danger of becoming a concrete jungle, the commission says it is sensitive to concerns of homeowners and developers who will have to follow the policy.

The city is considering several ways of financing sidewalks, said Mayor Jessie Stelling.

If the city pays the entire bill, then sidewalks will be installed only where they are most needed, which means that some people who want them might not get them.

If the city decides that sidewalks should go everywhere, then the homeowners and developers will have to pay, she said.

However, Stelling added, "I think we're going to end up somewhere in between." The commission will finish reviewing the

draft at its next meeting. The city Finance Committee will then review the policy to determine costs to the city and homeowners. The City Council will then act on the proposal.

Let you think you've already lost that beautiful maple tree in front of the family picture window, rest assured that you'll have a chance to air your views.

Long before an ordinance is drafted, the Plan Commission will hold two public hearings. The dates have not been set.

One of many issues of contention in the boundary of different landscape types is sidewalks.

Using baby steps the city advanced from no sidewalks, to a sidewalk section in a drive, and then to the point where, starting in the mid-1990's, new subdivisions were required to have sidewalks.

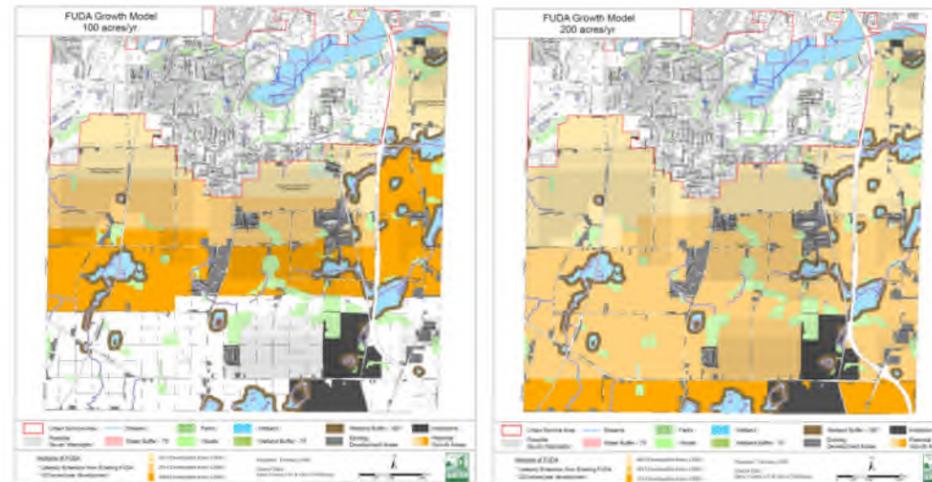
Existing Land Use Map



In many respects Fitchburg is a microcosm of Dane County.

In fact, it is representative of a transect--it has urban and suburban developments, rural subdivisions, scattered rural development, farmland and natural features like wetlands and woods. Experience shows us, that yes William Cronon was correct, that the most contentious issues are present near or at the borders of the different landscape types.

2007 Growth Models

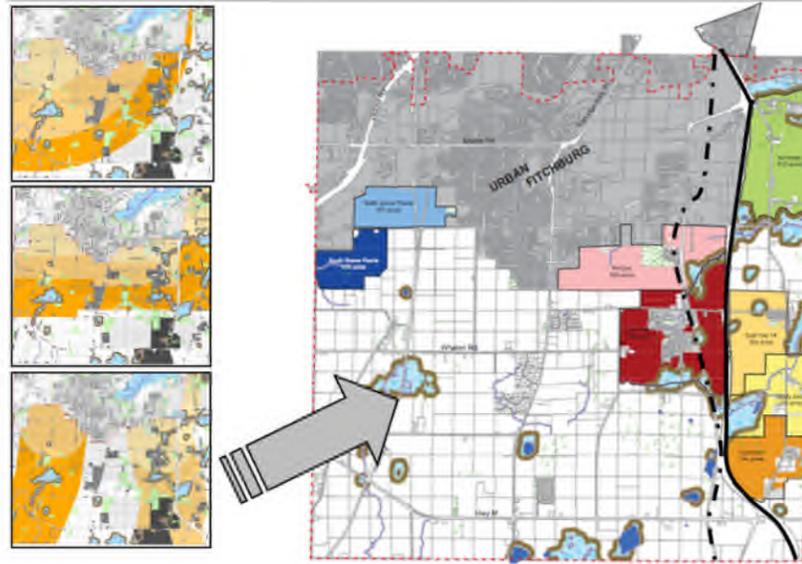


Two of the variety of growth model options explored, both using 100 acres/year

During the creation of the 2009 Comprehensive Plan the city went through an intense process to define future growth. Realizing a need to accommodate a population increase of about 5,000 persons a decade, the question arose as to the level of sustainability of a growth pattern that devours land at over 100 acres/year.

A variety of models, at 50 and 100 and some at 200 acres of growth per year were produced, from linear, nodal, resource and agricultural land preservation being just a few.

Future Urban Growth Area Neighborhoods



Taking a vision to a plan required us to do what planners do, balance a variety of concerns. In the end it was a hybrid model developed by mixing and matching the desires of various interest groups, finding common ground on what it is that is valued. It is not perfect, but it is the long term vision that defines Fitchburg. Growth and development are often viewed as measures of success. But, success is also respecting the community vision and values. CARPC would take this Future Urban Growth model, and its use of varied service, land use and resource factors, for use in other communities through out the county.

Value Expression



Community vision is expressed in a variety of ways, most importantly through the built environment. Geographer David Sack, once wrote: “Understanding the spatial manifestations of behavior becomes increasingly urgent as social relations continue to increase in complexity.” The built environment is an interplay between the population, its values and its social relations. As Tuan wrote, “If something is of sufficient importance to us we usually find the means to give it visibility.”

City of Fitchburg Comprehensive Plan

“Maintain the **coexistence of the urban and rural areas**, creating **attractive highly intensive transit oriented neighborhoods** and improving the quality of older areas through maintenance and redevelopment, while maintaining the natural resources and high quality farmland that resembles the history of the City.”



Adopted March 2009, the Comprehensive Plan balances a variety of factors to set a long term vision through its identification of community values.

Rural Fitchburg is important to the character of the community—and hence a desire for its continuation and preservation.

Fitchburg needs to respect its agricultural land, for that heritage makes up such a large part of the community’s collective value. For, its heritage needs to be able to recalled other than in old photos and plat maps.

The urban-rural tension will not cease, but, as planning and past experience show, it can be managed. It comes down to working your plan.

Sense of Place--formed by Values



Among other things, planners wish to create place to encourage engagement and discernment, and to allow lives to be led in a productive, purposeful and meaningful manner. Undifferentiated space becomes a place when that space is endowed with value. The values of a community are not always easy to discern. After all, people have different beliefs, experiences and memories which have formed their values. But, as planners the task is to take these varied values and find common ground. The values of the ladies who made up the Swan Creek Sewing Circle were identified in the bandages prepared, the clothes they made, and the quilts they pieced together. So, too are the values of Fitchburg identified when the land is transformed by human activity. The ethos and values of a place are told in its history. The values expressed in the land, Fitchburg's quilt, will be around a very long time.

I am grateful to the long hours present and past Plan Commission members have given to form the city. As Alexis de Tocqueville, the commentator on early American life, mentioned in his work Democracy in America, "The health of a democracy may be measured by the quality of functions performed by its private citizens." The citizens of Fitchburg should be grateful for your service.

This presentation began with a quote from a work by Yi Fu Tuan, and that is how it will end: "The effort to evoke a sense of place and of the past is often deliberate and conscious."

Thank you!

