

NOMINATION

FOR: Kansas Chapter of the American Planning Association Pioneer Award (Small Town/Rural)

NOMINEE: The Riley County Vision 2025 Committee

REASON: Committee's effort towards the completion of "Vision 2025 - A Comprehensive Plan for Riley County, Kansas October, 2009"

PREPARED BY: Monty R. Wedel, Director, Riley County Planning & Development

Planning Solution - Description of the problem or need and how planning played a role in the solution

Riley County adopted a 20-acre minimum lot size requirement in 1980 to discourage the premature development of agricultural areas. Due to the continued growth of the Manhattan metropolitan area over the last several years, the 20-acre requirement became less and less effective and actually began to encourage the conversion of 20-acre tracts from agricultural to residential use. This was not only creating conflicts between agricultural and residential uses, but was also promoting a very inefficient land use pattern for the provision of public services.

The Riley County Vision 2025 Committee was formed to help develop a planning solution through the development of a new comprehensive plan for the county. The 25-member committee was appointed by the Board of County Commissioners and included representatives of organizations key to the success of the project, including realtors, builders, developers, township officers, Farm Bureau, Kansas Livestock Association, Conservation District, Nature Conservancy, Audubon Society, school districts, the sand & gravel industry and more.

The specific charge to the Committee from the Board of County Commissioners is listed below:

The VISION 2025 Committee Charge

1. Examine the relationship between private property and the furtherance of the public health, safety and general welfare;
2. Determine the appropriate balance of private property rights and the public good and develop principles that will be used to make decisions regarding future land use in Riley County;
3. Using the principles, make specific recommendations to the Riley County Planning Board and the Board of County Commissioners regarding the following:
 - A. Goals and objectives for future land use in Riley County considering the recent Vision 2025 survey results and other pertinent information;
 - B. The proper mix (i.e. amount and location, etc.) of land uses in the rural areas over the next 20 years; and
 - C. Zoning and subdivision regulation changes and other implementation strategies needed to accomplish the determinations made above.

The Committee conducted approximately 25 meetings over a 20-month period with the public invited to attend all meetings. They spent a significant amount of time discussing the issue of balancing land use regulation with personal property rights, and from there developed a unique set of principles to accomplish this. To complete the Vision 2025 plan, the Committee had to overcome many strong differences of opinion to arrive at acceptable planning solutions. They accomplished this with the assistance of professional facilitators and staff using a modified-consensus process. Multiple exercises were used to help move the group toward a mutually agreed upon end product.

Creative yet Practical - Description of the original thinking involved with the solution and demonstration of public involvement and support

The Vision 2025 process involved many unique attributes not typically found in most comprehensive planning processes. The Committee was strongly resolute in completing their task with the assistance of only facilitators and local staff. They did not desire any outside consulting assistance. Although this type of process took considerably longer, the Committee demonstrated remarkable perseverance in seeing the project to completion. In the end, all Committee members supported the final document.

To promote consistency and fairness in land use decision-making, the Committee created a Development Guidance System (DGS). A major extension of time to the process (approximately 6 months) resulted from the Committee's insistence on the formulation of a Land Evaluation Site Assessment (LESA) system as a component of the overall DGS. Although somewhat fashioned after the original Soil Conservation Service LESA system, the Riley County LESA is totally unique in its structure, point system, conformance to the "Golden Rules" of Kansas land use law, and is specifically designed for the purposes of Riley County. The system was tested on multiple locations to ensure its functionality and utility for guiding development in Riley County, in accordance with the desired goals and objectives. The DGS is also unique in that it specifically includes the consideration of a Hardship Factor.

An original solution to the concern of conflict between agricultural and residential uses was the concept of developing a "Surrounding Agricultural Land Easement" (SALE) to prevent nuisance lawsuits from new residential uses encroaching into agricultural areas. All new residential uses in the rural areas would be required to dedicate this easement as a condition of development. The Committee's main implementation strategy was to eliminate the current 20-acre minimum lot size in favor of having all proposals for non-agricultural residential uses proceed through the development review process, using the DGS, the SALE and other implementation tools. The grandfathering of a significant number of existing tracts would be discouraged to maintain intact agricultural areas.

The extent of public involvement in the entire process is well documented in the Vision 2025 Plan and appendix. The final phase of public acceptance included seven public meetings across the county using public responses to questions via electronic voting. Unique to this process was direct discussion and response from the public regarding the balancing of property rights. In the end, there was significant majority support from the public for the plan. The plan was adopted unanimously by the Riley County Planning Board and Board of County Commissioners at the public hearings with no public opposition.