



TO: Members of the Senate Committee on Government Operations and Consumer Protection
FROM: Zach Herrstadt, Wisconsin Farmers Union – (608)234-3741;
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DATE: October 21, 2015
RE: Senate Bill 266/Assembly Bill 371, Relating to Comprehensive Planning

Good afternoon. My name is Zach Herrstadt and I am the Government Relations Associate for Wisconsin Farmers Union. I'd like thank you for the opportunity to share comments on SB-266 and AB-371, relating to comprehensive planning. Wisconsin Farmers Union has serious concerns that rolling back comprehensive planning will accelerate the loss of farmland in the state of Wisconsin. For this reason, **we oppose this measure and encourage you not to move forward with this bill.**

In 1999, the Wisconsin state legislature passed a comprehensive planning law that set forth a framework for local units of government to use when mapping out future land use and economic development decisions. The bill was signed by then-governor Tommy Thompson, and from that point towns and counties had about 10 years (until January 1, 2010) to develop local comprehensive plans.

The comprehensive planning law is supported by a diverse cross-section of groups throughout Wisconsin. One of the reasons for this widespread acceptance is that the law doesn't dictate from the top down how a town or county must develop. Those decisions are left to each individual locality.

The current law does not force local governments to make any particular land use decisions. Instead, by providing categories that a comprehensive plan needs to cover (such as housing, transportation, agriculture, and economic development) the law sets a general framework to guide local governments in those land use decisions while leaving it up to each locality to decide how to address each category. In other words, the comprehensive planning law simply poses a series of questions. It is up to individual localities and local citizens to answer them.

One of the many strengths of the current law, is that it sets forth required procedures for gaining citizen input. By encouraging public involvement, the law helps to foster an environment in which local citizens feel an increased sense of responsibility to and ownership of their community.

Why is comprehensive planning important to farmers? Comprehensive planning is important to farmers and to the agricultural community as a whole because it encourages citizens and local governments to think in advance about preserving their best farmland. Once land is converted from farmland to commercial or residential development, there is little chance that it will ever go back. Prime farmland is sacrificed to build things like strip malls and residences every time there is an economic boom, and all too often those homes and shops are empty by the next economic bust.

One of the biggest challenges facing Wisconsin agriculture today is that the number of farms in the state is dropping while the average age of our farmers is rising. It's no secret that Wisconsin needs more young farmers. However, lack of access to land is one of the most significant impediments to young people getting into farming. According to the 2011-2013 Biennial Farmland Preservation Program Report released by the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection (DATCP), Wisconsin lost 226,600 acres of farmland to development from 1997-2007. From 2002-2007 Wisconsin lost an average of 22,500 acres of farmland per year to development. This means that about 51 percent of farmland loss in Wisconsin



during that five year period was due to development. A spatial analysis conducted by Dr. Aaron Thompson, an Assistant Professor of Natural Resource Planning at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and a Specialist with the Center for Land Use Education yielded similar numbers, finding that from 1992-2010 Wisconsin lost a total of 396,583 acres of farmland to development – an average of 22,032 acres per year.

Planning where development will go, rather than leaving development to coincidence, ensures that the most valuable and productive agricultural land stays in farming. Thinking ahead about planning decisions also makes rural towns and villages more attractive and livable, which is a selling point for young people who are thinking of getting into farming.

While I am able to provide you with the reasons why comprehensive planning is important to many of Wisconsin's present and future farmers, I do not work directly with communities to form and implement these plans. However, Robert Walter, the chair of the Planning, Development and Resources Committee in Dunn County does just that. Mr. Walter is a retired attorney with extensive experience in planning and zoning processes. He possesses unique insight into why SB-266/AB-371 would represent a step backward for local governments. Mr. Walter is unable to be here today, but he has given me permission to read a short piece of testimony that he wrote. With the Chairman's permission, I'd like to read that testimony if I could.

Testimony by Robert Walter, Chair of the Dunn County Planning, Development and Resources Committee

"Just a very few years ago, the loss of agricultural land was headline news. Development was a major contributor, whether for commercial or, more likely, for residential purposes. Our countryside was disappearing in favor of a disorganized tapestry of residential uses. Not only was farmland disappearing, local governments were faced with demands for services necessary for residents, including construction and maintenance of roads several thousand feet in length, serving one or two residences. The costs, both social and financial, became prohibitive.

In response, the Wisconsin Legislature enacted the Smart Growth initiative requiring comprehensive planning and, consistent with the plan, zoning and other land use tools to make it work.

Are the requirements of Smart Growth onerous? Absolutely not! What is required is systematic deliberation, broad community involvement and consensus building. Fewer arbitrary decisions can be made because the public is involved in the process.

The results of this process include: a) orderly growth, thus avoiding use conflicts and undue demands for willy-nilly infrastructure; b) public involvement, thus enhancing the quality of life in the community and the lives of our constituents; c) adoption of goals such as farmland preservation; and d) a higher percentage of stakeholders who are familiar with the rules and the directions of their communities.

To eliminate comprehensive planning from the toolbox of local government would be a step (actually several) in reverse, opening up the likelihood of unfettered consumption of farmland, an increase in conflicts of uses and isolation of the public from policy decisions."