

# **INTRODUCTION**

## **REGIONAL SETTING AND HISTORY**

The Town of Somerset lies in the northwest corner of St. Croix County and is the largest town in the county. The St. Croix River is along the western border of the town and is part of the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway, one of seven such designated rivers in the United States. This border is a striking combination of 200-foot limestone palisades, lush green swampy grasslands and low bank shorelands. The interior of the town is typified by gently rolling hills and numerous wooded areas.

The County of St. Croix was organized in 1838 and at that time was part of the Wisconsin Territory which extended into areas of the present day state of Minnesota. On February 2, 1844, Stillwater was designated as the county seat. In 1848 the Wisconsin Territory became a state, at which time the St Croix River became the western border for the state and St. Croix County.

The original natives of the area were, for the most part, people of the Dakota and Ojibway Native American tribes. European fur trappers and explorers used the St. Croix River as a travel route as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the beauty of the valley was noted in their journals and records.

The first European settlers in the present Town of Somerset were two French Canadian brothers, Joseph and Louis Parent who arrived in 1850 and in 1851 built a cabin near the confluence of the St. Croix River and the present day Apple River. They might have built on flatter land to the north and east but, supposedly, this area with its beautiful rivers, cliffs and trees reminded them of their home back in The Province of Quebec.

The Parent brothers named the settlement Apple River Falls and invited friends and family to join them. As others arrived a schoolhouse and a church were built and a French Canadian community was born. To this day French surnames dominant the phone books and the tax lists in the Town of Somerset.

The Town of Somerset was organized on September 19, 1856 and Thomas Chappell was elected as Town Chairman. In 1859, General Samuel Harrison arrived in the Town of Somerset and proceeded to build a sawmill on the Apple River upstream from the original settlement. The sawmill prospered and a church, hotel and a schoolhouse were constructed in what was then called the “Village of the Town” and is now the Village of Somerset. The Village of Somerset was incorporated in 1918 and is completely surrounded by the Town of Somerset.

## **THE PRESENT AND ITS CHALLENGES**

Today the beauty of the area attracts people to it and the Town of Somerset now faces issues all too common for a largely rural community on the fringe of a major metropolitan area. The community is dynamic, and each new development is viewed as an opportunity for some and a threat to a rural lifestyle to others. As the demand for land, roads and public facilities increased, the community recognized the need to plan for effectively managing change. At present, new major bridge and highway facilities linking the town to the Twin Cities are planned or underway, and the town’s desirable rural character and the area’s robust economy have created increasing

development pressures. The Town of Somerset is in close proximity to the cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota. Subsequently, as part of St. Croix County, Somerset is also part of the Minneapolis- St. Paul Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). The influence of the metropolitan area is apparent in Somerset. Many of the town's residents commute to the Twin Cities for employment and, because of the limited local commercial establishments, much of the shopping residents do is in the metropolitan area. To sensibly accommodate future growth and development, town citizens and officials decided that it was time to develop a comprehensive plan for the Town of Somerset. The key ingredients for the planning effort have been an active Planning Commission, a concerned and cooperative Town Board and an interested and informed citizenry.

## **PLAN OBJECTIVES**

Although the primary reason for developing a comprehensive plan is to prepare for anticipated growth and development, there are other equally important reasons for going through a planning process. These reasons include: the protection of public health and welfare, preparing for and facilitating appropriate economic development, increasing the efficiency of public investments, protection of property values, obtaining and encouraging citizen participation in local government and maintaining the quality of life presently enjoyed in the community. The comprehensive plan also provides the basis for the updating of existing town ordinances and the creation of new ordinances that will serve as regulatory tools to manage growth and development activities to be consistent with the comprehensive plan.

## **THE PLANNING PROCESS**

The Town of Somerset Planning Commission, the Town Board and the West Central Regional Planning Commission have worked since mid-1996 toward the development of a comprehensive plan for the Town of Somerset. The first step was the development of a Land Use Plan, which was completed and approved in 1998. At that time a survey was developed with the support of the Extension Division of the University of Wisconsin - River Falls. This survey achieved a 96% return level and became a model for other Wisconsin communities' planning efforts. The concerns exhibited in that survey have guided the Planning Commission in preparation of this document.

## **THE COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING PROCESS**

Recently, the State law has required that, by January 1, 2010, all town, village, city and county decisions, actions or regulations that affect land use be consistent with their adopted comprehensive plan. The Town of Somerset Planning Commission was charged with the responsibility of learning how the community has changed, what changes are likely to occur in the future, what residents like or dislike about the current community, and what residents would like their community to become in the future. The Planning Commission used the survey mentioned above and convened a series of citizen meetings beginning with an open house held on a evening when the temperature was five below zero; yet ninety citizens filled the Town Hall and shared their concerns. Out of that group thirty-four citizens agreed to work in small groups focusing on specific aspects of the comprehensive plan. These focus groups then met over a three-week period and developed a group statement explicating their views on the plan element

they had addressed. This was followed by convening all focus groups to share their advice regarding their topic with the group at large and the Planning Commission.

Based on the requirements of State of Wisconsin statutes regarding comprehensive planning and public input, the Town of Somerset Planning Commission herein recommends to the Town Board appropriate means to preserve those aspects of the Town that the community believes are valuable and actions that should be taken to address the challenges of the future. The Planning Commission is responsible for providing recommendations to the Town Board that ensure that the implementation of the comprehensive plan is consistent with the plan's goals and objectives.

Addressed in the plan are the following sections:

Issues and Opportunities

Housing

Transportation

Utilities and Community Facilities

Agriculture, Natural and Cultural Resources

Economic Development

Intergovernmental Cooperation

Land Use

Implementation

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