



# Our Plan for the Future

*Our world whispers quality of life*

Three Lakes Comprehensive Plan  
**2010–2030**

**OMNI**  
ASSOCIATES

The Four Economic Cornerstones of Three Lakes  
Technology • Tourism • Agriculture • Cultural Arts





Fall Colors on Maple Lake



Aerial View of Three Lakes

### THREE LAKES TAG

THREE LAKES  
TOWN ACTION GROUP

CHARTING THE FUTURE  
OF THREE LAKES

DEVELOPING OUR  
STATE OF WI 66.1001  
COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

MAKING A DIFFERENCE  
TODAY FOR TOMORROW



*Three Lakes is an exceptionally  
friendly, alluring northwoods  
community that emphasizes quality  
of life for all generations.*

*We enjoy an unspoiled  
environment, while creating  
sustainable economic opportunities  
in technology, tourism, cultural arts  
and agriculture.*

*Three Lakes: Our  
world whispers quality  
of life!*



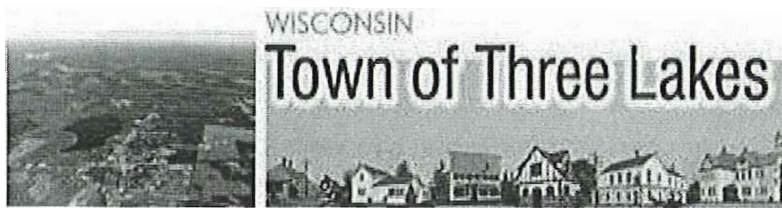
3 Eagle Trail



Fourth of July Parade

'Reeds-Spirit Lake'  
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**THREE LAKES TAG**  
THREE LAKES TOWN ACTION GROUP  
[www.tagthreelakes.com](http://www.tagthreelakes.com)

December 22, 2009

To: Citizens of Three Lakes

Re: 20-Year Comprehensive Plan Introductory Letter

The process of developing a 20-Year Plan for Three Lakes started in May 2007 with an ad posted by the Three Lakes Town Board in the local newspaper, excerpt to follow:

***The Town of Three Lakes is in the process of creating a community planning committee. The charge to the committee is "What do we as citizens of the community want Three Lakes to be in both the near and distant future?" . If you are interested in the future of the Town of Three Lakes and are willing to spend many hours without pay, please send a description of your interest and abilities to . . . . .***

Seventeen citizens showed up for the first meeting willing to answer the call for help and develop a 20-Year Comprehensive Plan to meet Wisconsin's statutes by January 1, 2010. Following are some excerpts from the minutes of the first meeting, July 24, 2007:

***Chairman Stebbeds offered opening advisory and general guideline remarks to the committee. Jerry Scheidt (later to be Economic Development Sub-Chair) asked for some direction from the Town's perspective on what is needed in a long range plan. Chairman Stebbeds stated that the Committee (later to become Town Action Group TAG) should decide what direction they want to head in. He did offer what he'd like to see are more decent wage job opportunities to keep our young people in Three Lakes. He then appointed Don Sidlowski as temporary organization Chair (later to become TAG Chair until April, 2009)***

Many requirements needed to be met under the Comprehensive Plan law. First, a Public Participation Plan needed to be developed and subsequently approved by the Town Board to encourage community input and involvement throughout the entire process. To start the engagement process, two Community Forums were held in 2007 that asked two questions:

- 1) What attracted you initially to Three Lakes?
- 2) What would you suggest to help make Three Lakes an even better place to live?

This input was used to identify the assets that the community considered important to protect and to compile a list of issues and opportunities for our town. With this information, TAG also created a vision statement to help guide the development of the Plan:

***Three Lakes is an exceptionally friendly, alluring Northwoods community that emphasizes quality of life for all generations. We enjoy an unspoiled environment, while creating sustainable economic opportunities in technology, tourism, cultural arts and agriculture.***

***Slogan: Our world whispers quality of life.***

In 2008, the TAG website [www.tagthreelakes.com](http://www.tagthreelakes.com) was developed to serve as another porthole to share and receive information from the community. During that summer, surveys were sent to all businesses and citizens asking for more detailed information of what the community wanted for the future of Three Lakes. Two themes stood out from the surveys:

- 1) Our economic base needed to be expanded beyond tourism
- 2) Need to maintain our "Quaint Charm"

In November, 2008 Community Forum #3 was held to share progress of the Plan and solicit more information from attending citizens. Several professional planners were considered in January of 2009 to guide the writing process of the Comprehensive Plan. OMNNI Associates in Appleton was chosen for this important step. Jeff Sanders, the Principal Planner of OMNNI, demonstrated the best understanding of our citizen's vision for the future of Three Lakes. More input was received from the community in June and August of 2009 (Forums #4 & 5) to help shape more elements of the Plan including the Future Land Use Map.



During the last 4 months of 2009:

- 1) 4 Special Meetings with the Three Lakes Town Board were held reviewing each Chapter;
- 2) 1 Intergovernmental Meeting and
- 3) 2 Open House events were hosted

On December 3, 2009 a Public Hearing on the Comprehensive Plan was held, which led to some Plan modifications and final adoption of the Plan on December 15, 2009.

It has been an exhaustive process over the past 29 months. TAG volunteers and others contributed over 3,500 hours to engage citizens, land owners, and the business community to solicit information and to develop the Plan. This truly was a community-evolved Plan. However, as with any long range plan, unforeseen developments can and will occur and changes to the Plan must be made. The process of implementation and plan management now falls within the jurisdiction of the newly formed Town of Three Lakes Plan Commission, which will submit future Plan recommendations to the Town Board. Citizen input will remain an important ingredient for this Plan to be successful, to help guide the future of our town. For it is **your** participation that builds the strength of the vision of what Three Lakes will be in the next twenty years and beyond. A place we can all know and love as that friendly, alluring Northwoods community that created a vision to improve the quality of life for all of its generations!

On behalf of your TAG volunteers,

Mike Kwaterski TAG Chair 2009  
Don Sidlowski TAG Chair 2007-2008

**TAG Officers**

John Brueggemann-Vice President  
Tom Rulseh-Community Relations Officer  
Dianna Blicharz-Secretary/Treasurer  
Rena Beyer-Liaison Officer

**TAG Sub-Committee Members**

Marie Moore  
Sam Christie  
Tera Fritz  
Pat & Chuck Radtke  
Norris & Joan Ross  
Linda Goldsworthy  
Tamarack Song  
Ken Klein  
Terry McCloskey  
Nancy Bollman  
Mark McCain  
John Brueggemann  
Mike Miller

**TAG Website Developer & Webmaster**

Don Sidlowski

**Former TAG Officers**

Diane Hapka-Liaison Officer  
John Olkowski-Secretary/Treasurer

**Town Office Personnel**

Courtney Peterson-Clerk  
Sue Harris-Secretary/Deputy Clerk

**TAG Sub-Committee Chairs**

Tara Stephens-Housing  
Dick Deaver-Transportation  
Rena Beyer-Util. & Comm. Facilities & Inter. Govern.  
Butch Fitzpatrick-Ag., Natural & Cultural Resources  
Jerry Schiedt-Economic Development  
Bruce Renquist-Land Use  
Fred Bouwman- Technology

Jeff Sanders-Principal Planner, OMNNI Associates

**Current Town Board-2009**

Don Sidlowski-Chairman  
Jeff Bruss-Supervisor  
Steve Garbowicz-Supervisor  
Dr. Bill Martineau-Supervisor  
Ed Starke-Supervisor

**Plan Commission-2009**

Mike Kwaterski  
Dr. Bill Martineau  
Don Sidlowski  
Ed Cottingham  
Tera Fritz  
Richard Javenkoski  
Jim Kumbera

**Former Town Board-2007**

Warner Stebbeds-Chairman  
Ed Cottingham-Supervisor  
Dave Hapka-Supervisor  
Frederick Schwartz-Supervisor  
Cindy Starke-Supervisor

**Citizen volunteers**

Paul Berg	Lance Hittman	Jim Leatzow	Dick Selman
Bob Curran	Bill Hren	Bev Long	Pat Volk
Bill Hayes	Lee Klauk	Catherine Marshall	Tom Wallschlaeger
Mike Hickerson	Mary Krue	Tom Nitz	Melissa Werner
Wade Wheeler	Kim Starke	Karla St. Louis	Roland Zimmermann

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**1.0 Introduction**

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# **Three Lakes** 2030

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of *Chapter 1: Introduction* is to provide readers with a general description of the Three Lakes community and explain the process which resulted in the development of the Town of Three Lakes Comprehensive Plan. Subsequent chapters delve deeper into historic and current conditions and provide a mechanism for achieving a community-supported vision for the future.



### **Where is Three Lakes?**

The town of Three Lakes is located in the northeast corner of Oneida County in Wisconsin's beautiful North Woods. Three Lakes borders the town of Hiles in Forest County (to the east), the towns of Lincoln and Washington in Vilas County (to the north), and the towns of Piehl, Stella and Sugar Camp in Oneida County (to the south and west). A key feature within the town is the largest inland chain of freshwater lakes in the world. A number of small creeks and streams flow through the community.

The primary ingress/egress corridor is U. S. Highway (USH) 45 which enters Three Lakes in the south central portion of the community before exiting in the northwest part of town. State Trunk Highway (STH) 32 enters the town in the far southeast corner before joining USH 45 within the business district of Three Lakes. Additional transportation routes include County Trunk Highway (CTH) A connecting Three Lakes to the Town of Sugar Camp and a number of town roads.

### **Town History**

The town of Three Lakes is a 125-year old community, having celebrated its quasiquicentennial in 2006. From its founding in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the town evolved organically in response to the external and natural forces which shaped it and the economies which developed as a by-product. During this same span of years, Three Lakes has not had a history of holistic long-term strategic planning for population growth, economic development, housing needs or the other elements such as are outlined in Wisconsin Statute 66.1001, the basis for which this strategic plan has been developed and adopted.

During the past two to three decades in particular, town government has directed a majority of its efforts and energies responding to current affairs as issues presented themselves in real time. One particular area in which a great deal of time and energy has been invested since the 1970s concerns the zoning of the town. As part of this activity, an extensive library of maps and plats has been developed which forms a record of the changes that were implemented. During these same decades in which zoning activity may have been viewed as planning, there are, in fact, only limited incidences of actual proactive comprehensive planning on a wider range of fronts.

# **Three Lakes** 2030

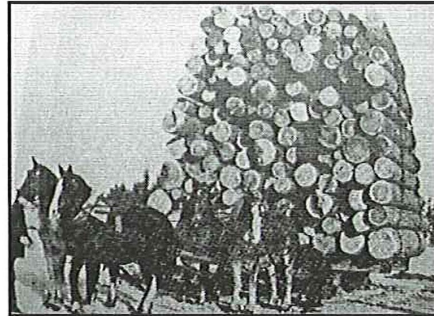
## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

In the mid 1980s, the Town made a seminal decision to rezone much of the then-available lands on and/or surrounding the Three Lakes Chain of Lakes (the "Chain") from forestry, farming and particularly commercial development to single-family residential. This was done with the expressed purpose of protecting the unspoiled qualities of the Chain from significant development. This specifically included the overbuilding of resorts and multifamily units such as condominiums as well as industrial development with the potential to pollute the pristine waters of the Chain. In so doing, the Chain would be preserved for its historical and intrinsic value as a destination for visitors, recreation and homeowner occupation. These decisions were consistent with the preservation of tourism, which was the then-prevailing economic engine driving the community.

However, some 20 years hence, it is now clear that this critical decision did not take into account a broader number of related factors for which concurrent long-range planning might have accounted. One resulting factor is that little, if any, land today in the town is zoned for commercial, retail and green industrial development. The community is now looking for more of a balance to draw new business to the area and, in the process, to increase the tax base and provide year-round stable employment.

### **HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

Since its formal organization as a town in 1881, Three Lakes has experienced three distinct eras. In order, they were: logging, potato farming and tourism. To satisfy the growing need for lumber in Chicago, Ill., and other parts to the south, vast areas of the North Woods were clear-cut during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Forest products are, of course, a renewable resource, but reforestation requires careful planning and the passage of time. It wasn't until the 1930s that the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was put to work in this region replanting forests where the virgin timber once stood. During the ensuing decades, the naturally sandy soil that once supported old-growth forests was turned over, the stumps were removed, and Three Lakes became an agricultural community. Family-owned and operated potato farms abounded, production soared, and warehouses to store and broker product expanded to the point that Wisconsin's first county agricultural agent was located in Three Lakes. Over time, commercial farming interests moved in and eventually absorbed all of the local farm production. Today, none of the commercial potato farms remain in production.



It was during this time of transition in the early 1900s from family potato farming that the North Woods became established as a premier destination for tourism and summer residency. Enabled by the mass production of affordable automobiles and the construction of passable roads, entire families traveled to Three Lakes and spent the summer season in residence. The same railroad that once hauled the local lumber off to parts beyond now delivered visitors from those same places. Housekeeping cottages and vintage resorts were constructed in large numbers. The Golden Age of Tourism for Three Lakes began in the 1930s and lasted well into the 1970s. For roughly the past 75 years, the Three Lakes economy has been largely fueled by and dependent upon tourism and seasonal visitors to the area.

# **Three Lakes** 2030

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **CURRENT CONTEXT**

Today, the town of Three Lakes is on the cusp of a *de facto* transition to its fourth distinct era. At issue is not whether tourism as a mainstay of the local economy is being supplanted. The only question is *by what* and *to what*. It is to this end that the Town has recognized the urgent need for long-range strategic planning augmented by short-term tactical action consistent with the overall vision for the future.

The plan presented herein is the culmination of another seminal decision made by the Three Lakes Town Board of Supervisors, this one in August of 2007, to fully embrace the mandate of Wisconsin Statute 66.1001 and, in the process, to create the most extensive, all-inclusive and forward-looking and -thinking comprehensive plan possible, one that will serve as a blueprint and guide for the Town through 2030. The process has included what was, in many cases, the first exhaustive and most thorough review possible of past history and activities and projected changes forecasted over a future 20-year planning horizon.

### **SUMMARY**

Following decades of prosperity thanks to a thriving economy fueled in large part by tourism and visitors, the Town of Three Lakes has built an impressive traditional infrastructure of facilities, services and town-owned buildings. The school system and library are top-rated in the state. The Chain of Lakes remains the most significant natural resource. Tourism remains an important part of the economy, but is declining due to changing demographic patterns. Tourism will always serve as the drawing card to induce people to visit Three Lakes. A small but thriving agricultural industry helps to define the town's character and supports a spin-off retail industry. Answers must be found to address the challenges of declining school enrollment, retention of high school and college graduates, affordable housing, good-paying jobs, land for balanced commercial economic development, meeting the rising expectations that visitors have for services and infrastructure, and the cost of energy needed for power and heat as well as to get visitors here.

### **Why is Three Lakes Developing a Comprehensive Plan?**

In 1999, the Wisconsin State Legislature passed, and former Governor Tommy Thompson signed into law, Act 9, Wisconsin's Comprehensive Planning Law (§66.1001 Wisconsin Statutes). The law requires that every municipality in the state that wishes to have a say in land-use decisions approve and adopt a comprehensive plan prior to January 1, 2010. In late 2008, the Town of Three Lakes hired OMNI Associates Inc., an Appleton-based consulting firm, to assist the Town in its continuing effort to develop the Town of Three Lakes Comprehensive Plan.



# **Three Lakes** 2030

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **PURPOSE OF THE PLAN**

The Town of Three Lakes recognized not only the need to comply with the requirements of Wisconsin Statute 66.1001, but also stated the expressed goal of not having to fall under the jurisdiction of the Oneida County plan by virtue of having a unique and specific plan of its own. The Town sees an opportunity to engage in the first broad-based, holistic, comprehensive long-range planning exercise in the town's long and rich history.

The plan will identify community development needs and will be a reflection of the desires of the town's residents. As part of the overall planning process, a vision statement for the town was created to assist in providing direction in developing this comprehensive plan.

*The vision statement for Three Lakes reads: Three Lakes is an exceptionally friendly, alluring North Woods community that emphasizes quality of life for all generations. We enjoy an unspoiled environment, while creating sustainable economic opportunities in technology, tourism, cultural arts and agriculture. Three Lakes: Our world whispers quality of life.*

The Town of Three Lakes Comprehensive Plan is intended to assist local and county officials implement the goals, objectives and policies outlined herein and to serve as a guide for making future decisions in each of the nine plan elements. The plan will also assist with development and management issues by addressing long-range needs and concerns regarding growth, development and preservation of the community while simultaneously identifying short-term tactical initiatives that can be undertaken now and which are in concert with the overall goals.

The comprehensive plan will assist in:

- identifying areas appropriate for development or preservation;
- recommending types of land uses for specific areas;
- directing housing that can best serve the community; and
- providing detailed objectives and policies to implement the overall plan goals.

This comprehensive plan has been prepared in accordance with Wisconsin's Comprehensive Planning law contained in Wisconsin Statute 66.1001 and is divided into a series of 12 chapters oriented around the nine required elements defined in the law:

1. Issues and Opportunities (Chapters 1, 2 and 3)
2. Housing (Chapter 4)
3. Transportation (Chapter 5)
4. Utilities and Community Facilities (Chapter 6)
5. Agricultural, Natural and Cultural Resources (Chapter 7)
6. Economic Development (Chapter 8)
7. Land Use (Chapters 9 and 10)
8. Intergovernmental Cooperation (Chapter 11)
9. Implementation (Chapter 12)

In addition, the state requires that these chapters be developed in concert with Wisconsin's 14 goals for local planning. These goals are highlighted throughout this plan.