

Cook County Plan

Common Ground

Creating Common Ground was a vital building block in this planning process. Key issues, attitudes and conditions were identified during this phase. It consisted of presenting topical papers for discussion and adoption by the Task Force, conducting a Community Survey, and making general observations about how current thinking on national and international levels influenced local views of Cook County's future. These elements of shared knowledge informed subsequent discussions and specific plan components.

The concept of common ground includes both the information itself and the process by which the plan is developed. In terms of process, seeking civil discourse and a shared sense of common understanding of the issues requires the following: expect and accept controversy which is the opposite of conflict, not the opposite of the absence of disagreement; depersonalize public debate so people may disagree over issues without endangering valuable social relationships in a small community.

ECOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Cook County has a wealth of obvious natural resources—Lake Superior, vast forested tracts, inland lakes and streams most of which have limited development upon them, and healthy populations of various plant and animal communities. It has been stated by some that the county enjoys relatively large, intact ecological systems. The *Cook County Comprehensive Water Management Plan*, although focusing on water resources, offers a mission statement speaking for all natural resources in the county:

Cook County, a land of forests, lakes, streams and wildlife; is blessed with an abundance of relatively pristine, life sustaining surface and ground waters. This resource, if managed wisely, will remain a basis of wealth – material as well as biological, aesthetic and spiritual – for many years to come.

Unlike the other topics covered in this chapter, there is a distinctive absence of adequate information about the environment. There is no comprehensive base line information and only sketchy amounts of data about selected topics over time. This section outlines the role of ecological factors in the ongoing process of making decisions that implement the comprehensive plan.

Among the conditions, features and concerns pertinent to understanding Cook County's ecological systems are the following:

- Cook County lies in the coniferous forest biome and has been endowed with a rich and diverse geologic, plant and animal natural heritage. Over the years this base of natural resources has been shaped by a wide variety of factors. Initially forest fires, insects, wind and beavers were major agents of change. Human activities, especially since the era of European settlement, which have done

much to alter local environmental conditions include logging, trapping, hunting, fire suppression, road and trail construction, acid rain, mining, and various forms of development from isolated cabins to cities. Even as human activities tend to dominate the agents affecting the environment, natural factors such as disease (e.g., spruce budworm) continue to play significant roles.

Both as a result of and in response to human interventions, forests have undergone tremendous transformations in spatial patterns, composition, and structure. For example, in some areas once extensive stands of white and red pine, cedar and northern hardwoods have given way in large part to aspen and aspen-birch. These changes in forest vegetation, most of which were set into motion 100 years ago, have been sustained through management policies emphasizing clear cutting, intensive reforestation of a small select group of species, and fire suppression, driven by the steady growth and shifting focus of market demands.

- Due to its geographic location Cook County is particularly rich in the number and diversity of flora and fauna. Due to its extensive public land holdings the ecosystems that support these flora and fauna have remained relatively intact and have permitted the species to be sustained. The presence of these comparatively intact and diverse ecosystems constitutes an opportunity for the human community to act to conserve and nurture its biological heritage.

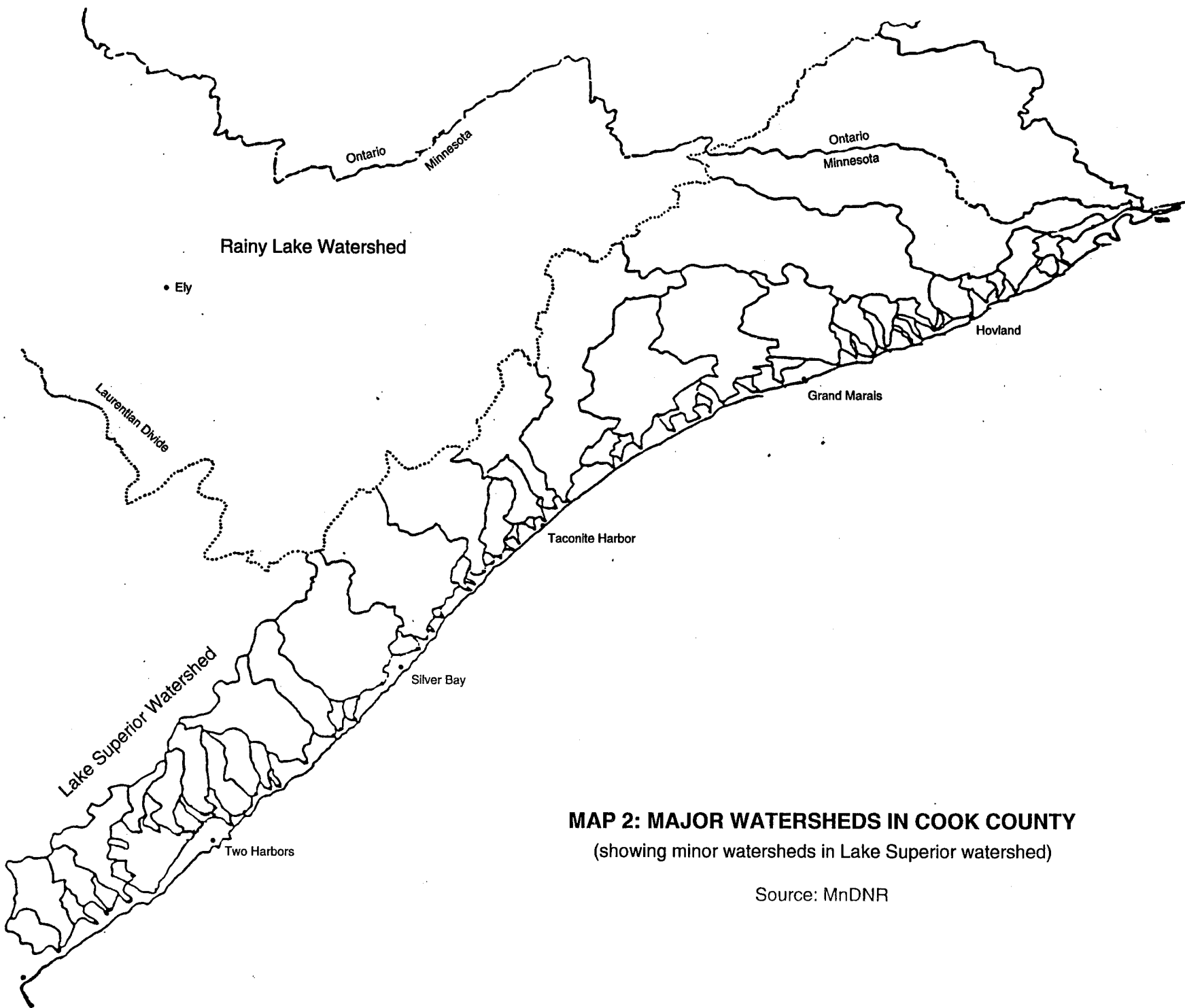
Table 1: NUMBER OF PLANT AND ANIMAL SPECIES IN COOK COUNTY and MINNESOTA

Type	COOK COUNTY		MINNESOTA	
	Number	No. Federal or State Listed or considered rare	Number	No. Federal or State Listed or considered rare
Natural Communities	41	—	114	—
Vascular Plants	about 670 spp.	67	1,500±	255
Breeding Birds	150 species	4	242	28
Breeding Mammals	52 species	4	81	15
Fish	91 species	4	153	21*
Herpetofauna (Reptiles & Amphibians)	17 species	1	48	14
Lichens	>320 species**	9	550	14
Mosses	226 species**	11†	586	54†
Invertebrates	Largest animal group by number or biomass; 80% of total species; most unknown	Example: 7 butterflies	Example: 145 butterflies are listed	49 (16 of these are butterflies)

* Includes Minnesota waters of Lake Superior.

** Species presently known.

† Species for which there is only one record in Minnesota.



Rainy Lake Watershed

• Ely

Laurentian Divide

Lake Superior Watershed

Silver Bay

Taconite Harbor

Grand Marais

Hovland

MAP 2: MAJOR WATERSHEDS IN COOK COUNTY
(showing minor watersheds in Lake Superior watershed)

Source: MnDNR

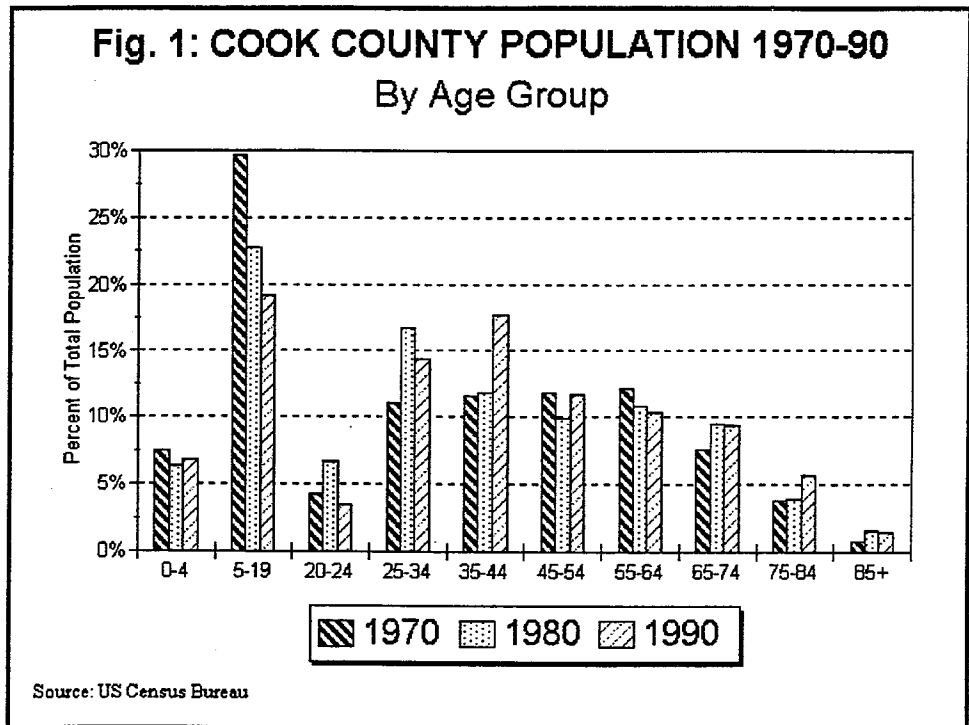
- Cook County is separated by the Continental Divide into two major watersheds. As shown on Map 2, the northwest quadrant drains toward Hudson Bay via the Rainy Lake watershed while the bulk of the county runs to Lake Superior and the Atlantic Ocean. The map does not identify the 16 individual watersheds draining to the north but it shows the 34 major watersheds (of 100 total) draining to Lake Superior. Excepting the Pigeon River which also drains parts of Canada, the largest watershed feeding Lake Superior is the Brule River (26,468 acres) followed by the Temperance (18,538 acres), Cascade (12,686 acres), Poplar (11,579 acres) and the Cross (7,952 acres) rivers.
- Lake Superior is the one natural feature that transcends all others in Cook County. By area it is the world's largest body of freshwater, containing over 10% of the total surface freshwater on earth. It could contain all the other Great Lakes in its volume. Its value as a large quantity of high quality water is known to resource strategists all over the world and it has not escaped the attention of politicians and civil engineers concerned with providing water to people, agriculture, and industrial processes all across North America.
- Wetlands are rare along Lake Superior's North Shore coast. Cook County is fortunate to have several excellent coastal wetlands of enough size to represent this relatively rare biotic community. It is necessary to differentiate between inland and coastal wetlands as opposed to providing blanket policies covering wetlands in general.
- The limited information on ground water conditions in Cook County contained in the *Cook County Comprehensive Water Management Plan* strongly indicates the lack of knowledge about this natural resource. While the lack of knowledge does not necessarily justify no action, it clearly justifies caution.
- The concepts of ecoregions and watersheds can be the foundation for generating broad unified land use and resource management goals, defining general decision-making policies, and evaluating specific proposals. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources has adopted a new ecosystem-based management philosophy that supports the use of such resource oriented decision making. This approach requires the balancing of three fundamental concerns: an environment that supports human, animal, and plant life; an economy that is strong and sustainable; and a community that provides a high quality of life.
- The ecosystem-based management philosophy fits well with the two geographic organizing frameworks offered by ecoregions and watersheds. The ecosystem-based management structure provides the conceptual framework for decision making. Ecoregions and watersheds offer the means by which people can visualize these concepts as applied to actual, on-the-ground situations. In terms of pro-active planning, ecoregions provide an ecologically-based structure for establishing common management directions across jurisdictional boundaries, especially for but not limited to natural resource management. This can be particularly useful in Cook County where most land is owned by public entities whose management mandates are not identical to that of the County and where a common foundation for planning and management is imperative. If all major entities applied ecoregion-based concepts, it would be easier to coordinate inter-jurisdictional initiatives and achieve mutually beneficial objectives.

DEMOGRAPHICS

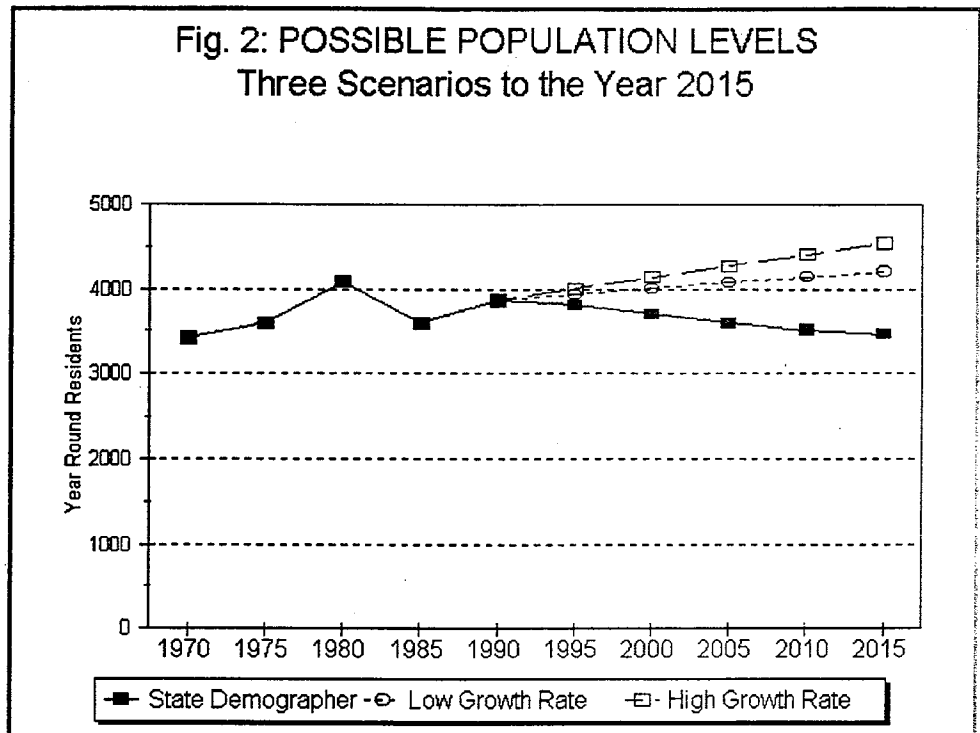
Cook County is the least populated county in Minnesota. With roughly 4,000 year-round residents, any change in population is significant to schools, governmental services, the base for future economic activity, and ongoing community vitality.

Among key demographic features of Cook County are:

- Population grew from 1970 to 1980 but then declined in 1990. The State Demographer had projected a continued decline but new estimates, supported by recent birth and death records and school enrollment, suggest an increase. The Demographer estimated the county's 1994 year-round population at 4,088.



- Minnesota Extension estimates the seasonal resident population can reach 12,000, a figure that will grow in the future.
- A "high" growth rate equal to recent trends would generate a year 2015 population of about 4,550.
- The county can likely expect continued net in-migration of 55-74 age group and net out-migration of 20-24 and maybe 25-34 age groups.



LAND USE

Over the past ten years Cook County has seen substantial changes in resort, residential, commercial and second home development. Because 90% of Cook County is publicly owned, activity on the remaining 10% is highly visible and significant. Recent changes in the Highway 61 corridor, where much of the developed private land is located, have fueled local and even state-wide debate about the effect of past and potential future development.

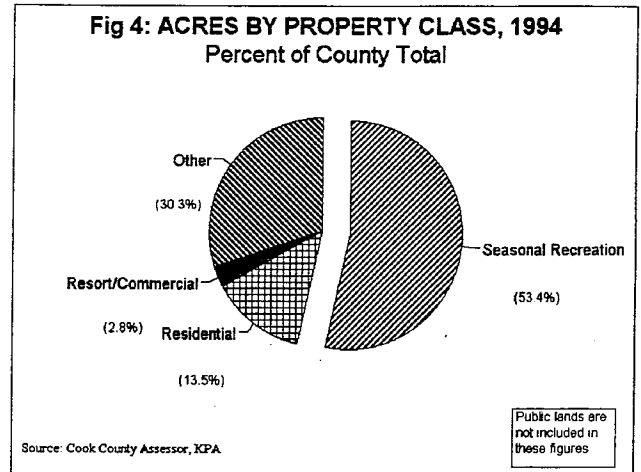
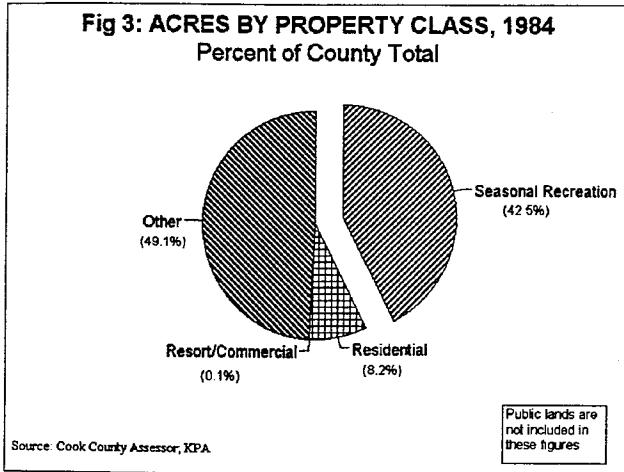
Critical land use factors, issues and probable future changes include:

- In 1982 approximately 149,000 acres (15% of county) was privately owned. By 1995 this figure declined to 96,900 acres (10%).

Table 1: COOK COUNTY ZONING DISTRICTS AND ESTIMATED LEVEL OF DEVELOPMENT (acres rounded to nearest hundred)				
District	Description	Min. Lot Size	Estimated Acres (1995)* of PRIVATE Land	
			Total	Vacant
FAR - 1 Forest/Ag Recreation	Forest management, agriculture, recreation in remote areas; dwellings permitted.	20 acres	56,400	39,000
FAR - 2 Forest/Ag Recreation	Same as FAR-1 except with greater emphasis on allowing low density residential uses generally along remote public roads.	10	12,600	8,700
FAR - 3 Forest/ag Recreation	Same as FAR-2 but with development at medium rural density.	5	19,400	13,400
R -1 Single Family Residential	Residential uses at a higher density generally adjacent to Hwy 61 or along Lake Superior.	2	8,900	6,200
LSR Lake Shore Residential	Residential uses governed by shore land regulations for lands within 300 feet of certain lakes	1	2,300	300
RC/R Resort Commercial / Residential	Provide for the specific commercial activity of resorts, lodges and outfitters. Limited residential and service businesses also permitted.	5	2,800	800
GC General Commercial	General basic commercial services located in the community centers of Schroeder, Tofte, Lutsen, Grand Marais, Hovland, and Grand Portage.	NA	500	100
LI Light Industrial	Light industrial activities in areas with good road access, available utilities and compatible uses.	2	200	0
HI Heavy Industrial	Land for heavy industry such as mineral processing and power generation.	40	400	300
BDA Business Development Area	Areas suitable for manufacturing, warehousing and other low intrusion industrial activities.	No sewer 1	100	100

* Estimated acres in each district is based upon computer analysis of zoning maps. Number of improved acres is based upon Assessor's records and judgement of zoning officer and consultant.

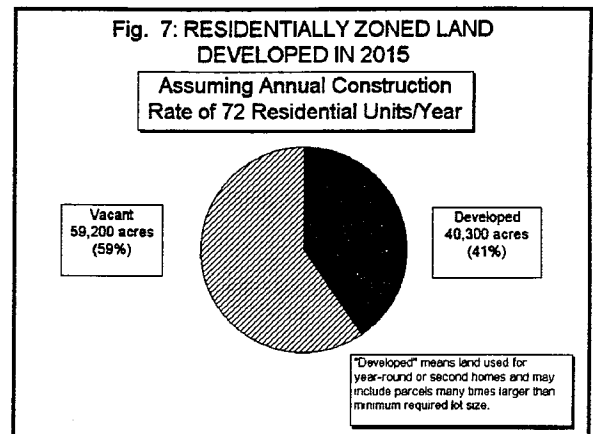
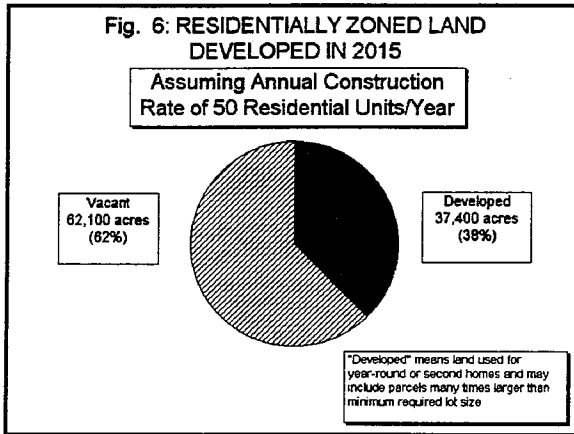
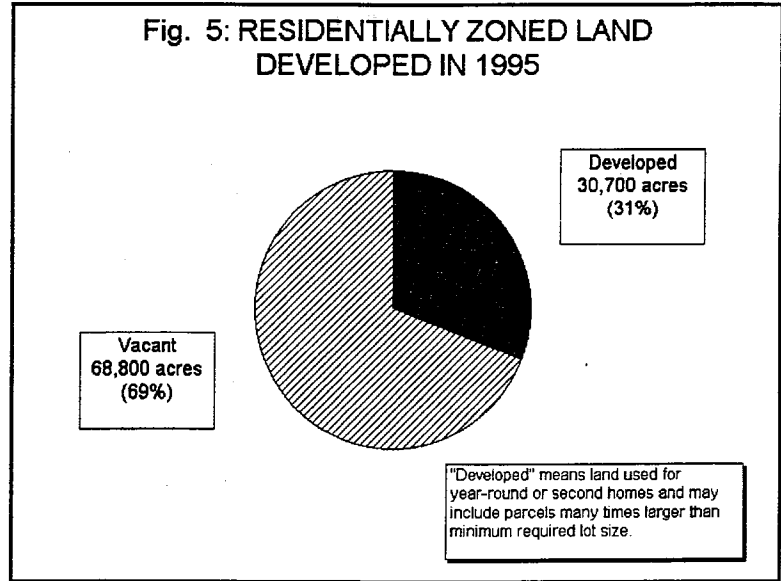
- An estimated 31% of residentially zoned land is developed; 69,000 acres remain.
- The recent transfer of Trust for Public Land property in the East End opened 20,000 acres for primarily residential development.
- The amount of land for new commercial-resort development was highest in West End, but Grand Marais had nearly half the gain in property value.
- Concern over development design led to a design ordinance in Tofte and a sign ordinance in Grand Marais.
- From 1984 to 1994 seasonal recreation land grew from 43% to 53% of private land. Commercial-resort lands showed significant growth but still only occupies 4% of private land.



- According to the recent community survey, 500 new second homes likely will be built over the next 20 years.
- If only half the currently vacant, residentially zoned land is available, it can accommodate the current high growth rate (about 72 new year-round and seasonal residences per year).

Table 2: TWO POSSIBLE GROWTH SCENARIOS FOR RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT COOK COUNTY 1995 TO 2015
(These are not forecasts or projections)

	1995	Year 2015	
		At 50 Units / Year	At 72 Units / Year
Year Round Households			
Units	1,450	1,830	1,980
Estimated Population	4,115	4,209	4,554
Seasonal Households			
Units	2,510	3,190	3,480
Estimated Population	6,877	8,741	9,535
Total Households			
Units	3,960	5,020	5,460
Estimated Population	10,992	12,950	14,089

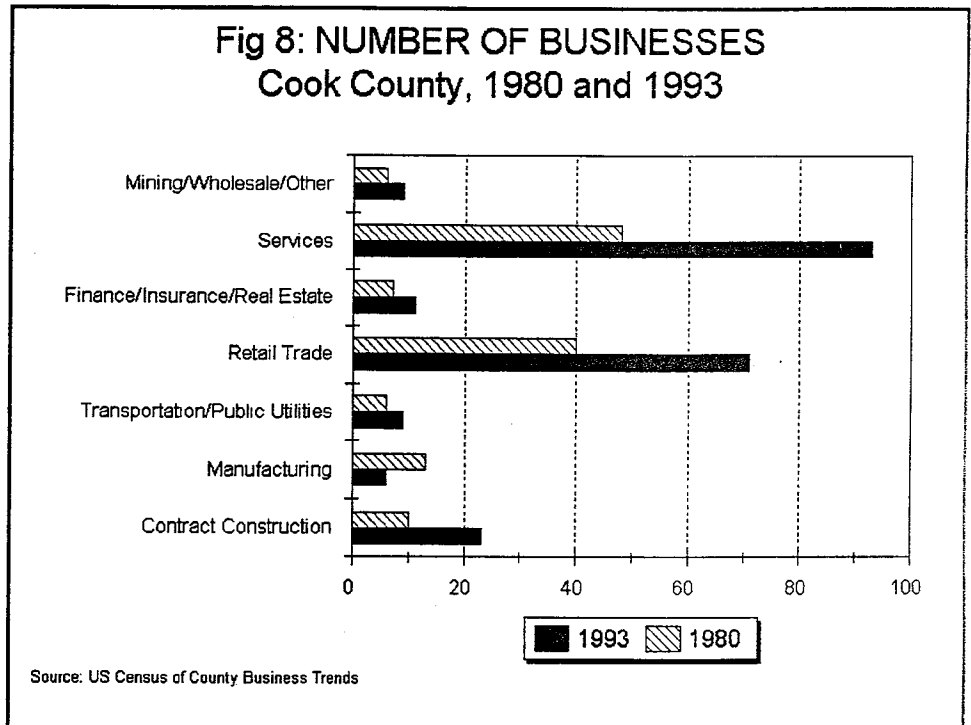


THE ECONOMY

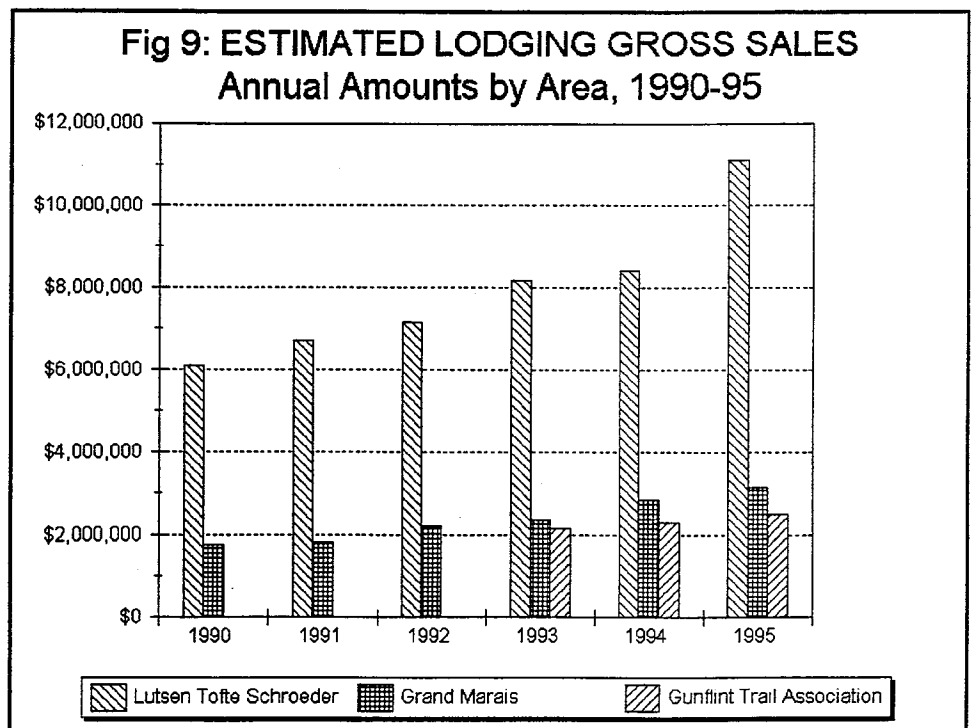
Cook County's economy has always been based on natural resources, at first furs, timber and fishing, now tourism and timber. Never a rich county, the area attracts people willing to work hard for modest incomes in order to live in a beautiful part of the state. Although not fully immune from the pressures decimating Minnesota's other rural areas, Cook County has managed to more than just survive. Currently it is experiencing an economic surge that has created jobs, opportunities, and some controversy.

Elements of Cook County's economy that merit attention are:

- Service and retail trade businesses grew in number since 1980, a trend reflecting growth of tourism-oriented businesses. Changes in the number of businesses in Cook County seem tied to changes in the tourism economy more than to changes in year-round population or seasonal home development.



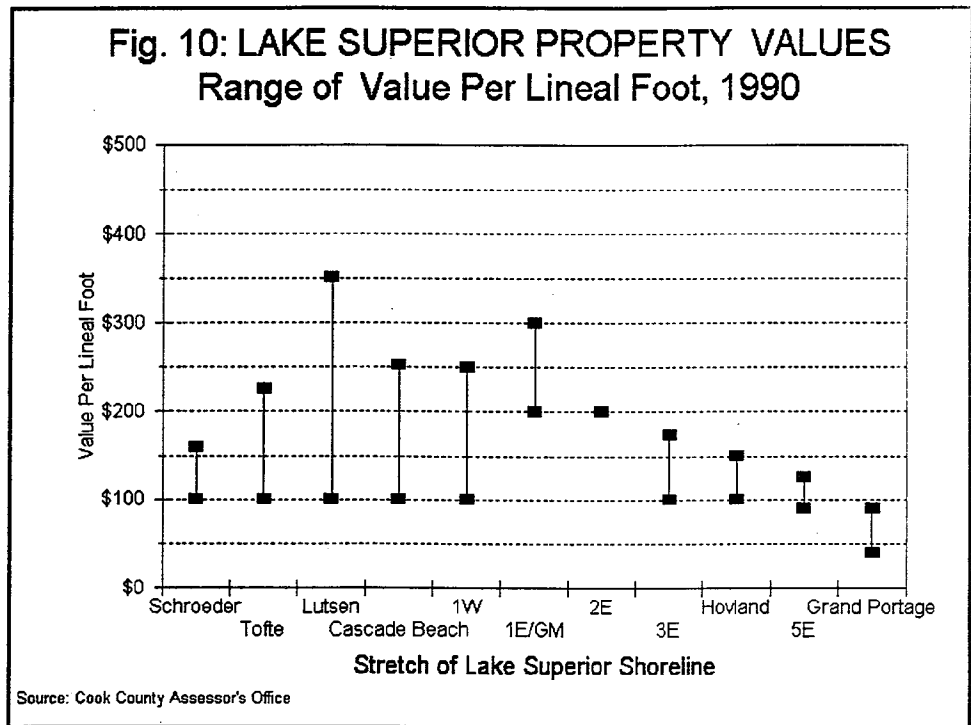
- County's non-farm self-employment rate nearly doubles State average.
- Average household income is one-quarter lower than for State.
- Nearly one-fifth of households receive retirement income.

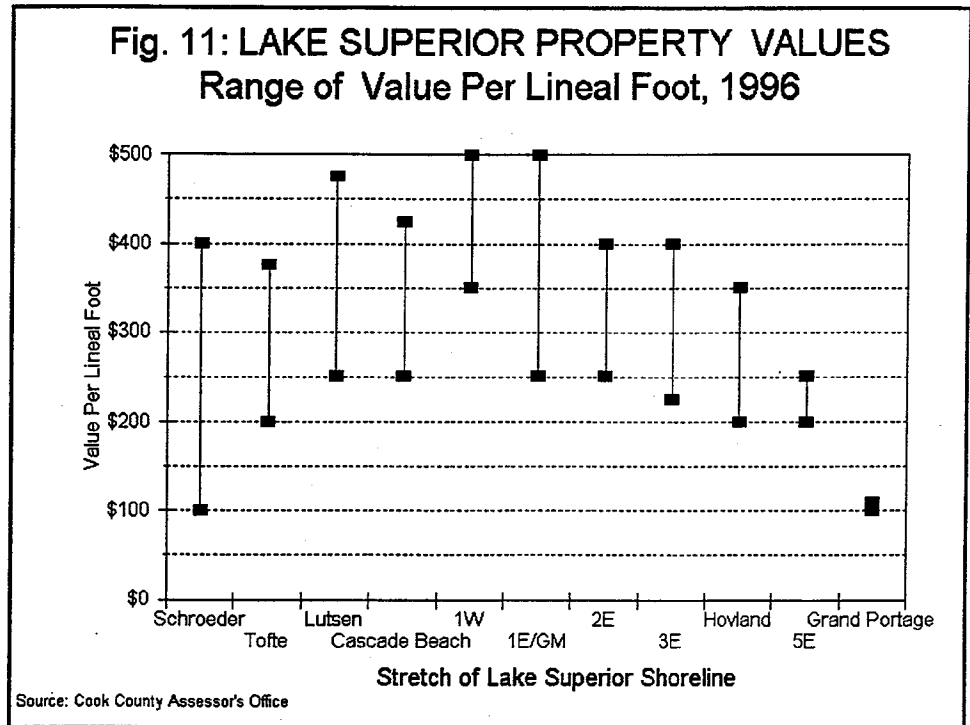


- Employment equals 70% of the population suggesting high participation rate in work force and many non-county residents working in county.

Housing and real estate have generated much interest because construction and related services are a growing economic sector and the impacts generated by the owners of second homes is sizeable.

- Residential permits issued by Cook County was steady at 40-50/year between 1984 and 1988. In 1989 they rose to 70 and remained at 60 to 76 since.
- The average value of new housing has risen from \$38,000 in 1990 to nearly \$80,000 in 1994.
- Vacant land on Lake Superior increased from \$50,000 to \$83,000 between 1989 and 1994. Median value of improved residential properties rose from 1989 to 1992 but declined the next two years.





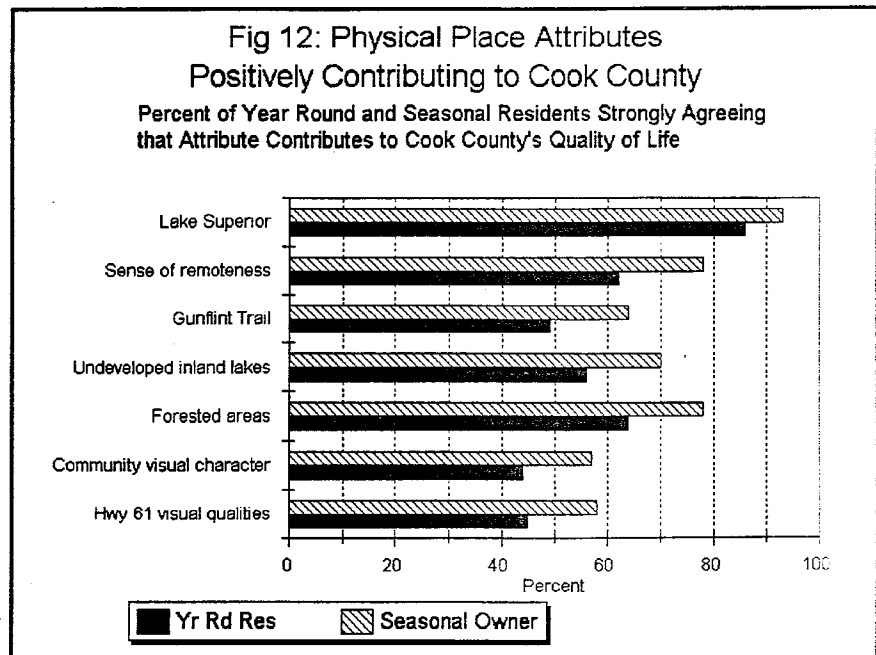
- Median price of inland lakeshore property rose from \$47,000 to about \$67,000 during this period. Vacant shoreland property only began to rise above the inflation rate in 1994.
- The median price of rural (non-lakeshore) residential property generally rose even with the U.S. inflation rate from 1989 to 1994. In 1993 vacant rural land began to increase at a slightly greater rate.
- Lack of affordable housing for work force is considered a potential drag on the economy.

CITIZEN SURVEY

Many means were used to gain a solid understanding of the concerns and opinions of the citizens directly affected by the plan. A survey was used to reach the broadest range of people. It was sent to year-round residents and seasonal property owners to gauge their opinions on issues related to the county's sense of place and on broad land use development topics. Seasonal property owners were included since they comprise the largest amount of private development in the county and, if all occupied their property at the same time, they would out number Cook County residents. A total of 1,706 surveys were received representing 41% of the universe of potential respondents.

The following summarizes the survey's basic findings.

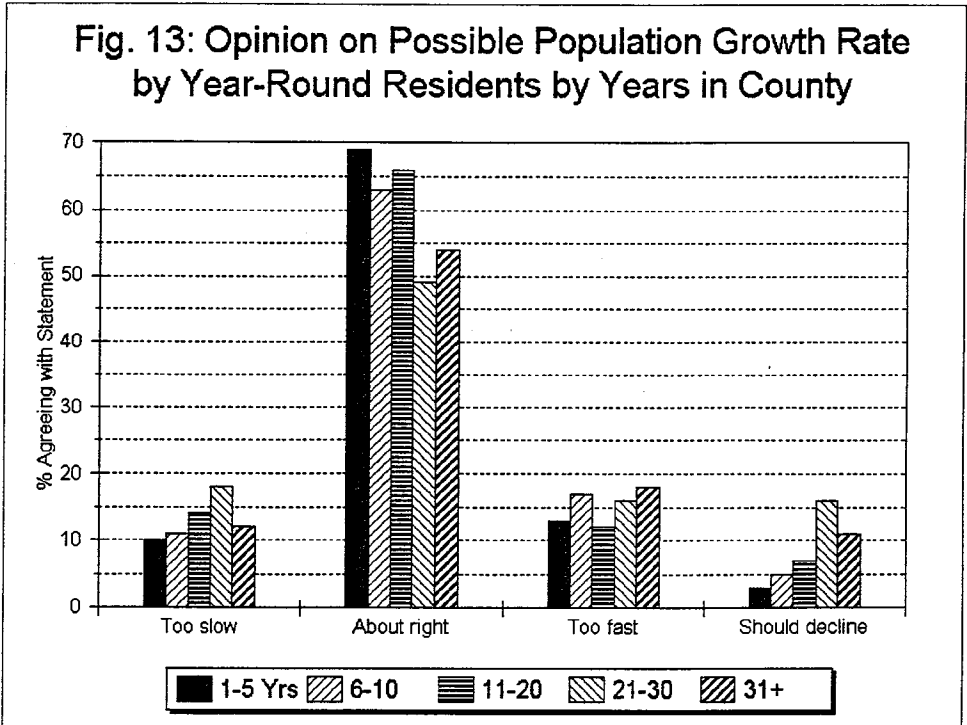
- Year-round and seasonal residents have similar viewpoints, but seasonal residents are slightly more adamant in their beliefs; this was especially true for people who just recently bought property in Cook County.



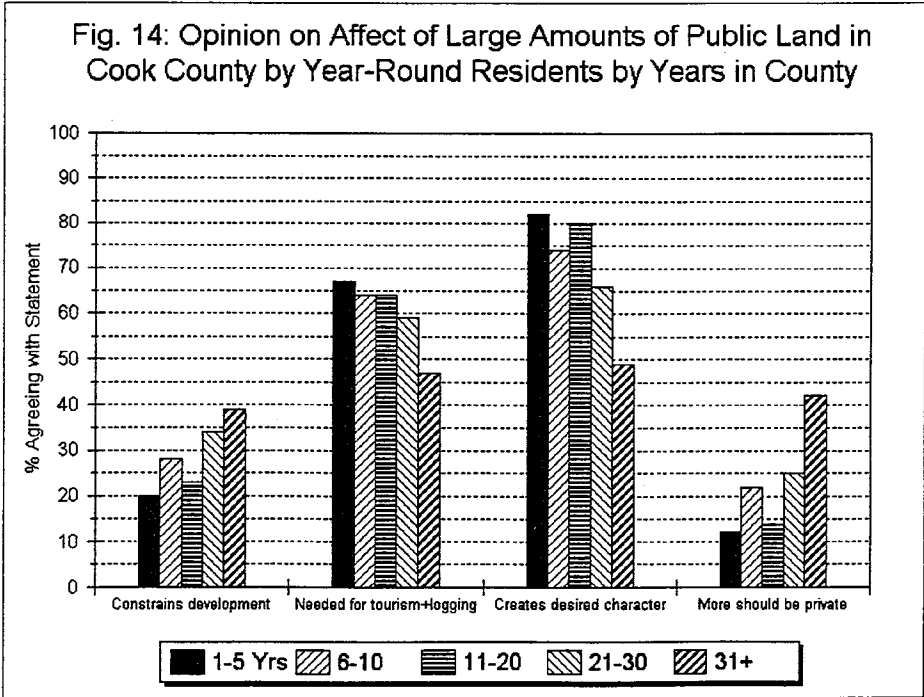
- **Year-round residents** showed divergence only based upon the length of time they have lived in the county. Opinions of residents who have lived in the county longer tend to shift to both polar extremes. It cannot be determined if this change occurs because people's attitudes change over time or if newcomers actually have different opinions.
- **Seasonal property owners** showed no significant divergences of opinion based on length of ownership, location or type of property.
- Cook County's physical characteristics most clearly define the positive quality of place; Lake Superior is the number one feature. Community factors were not as strong as physical features in defining the county. The economic factors listed had uniform support but were ranked lower than community or physical features.

Seasonal residents showed greater agreement on the value of the physical and community features than did year-round residents; they were softer in their support for most economic factors except the impact of tourism and second homes on the local economy (seasonal residents placed greater emphasis on this than did year round residents).

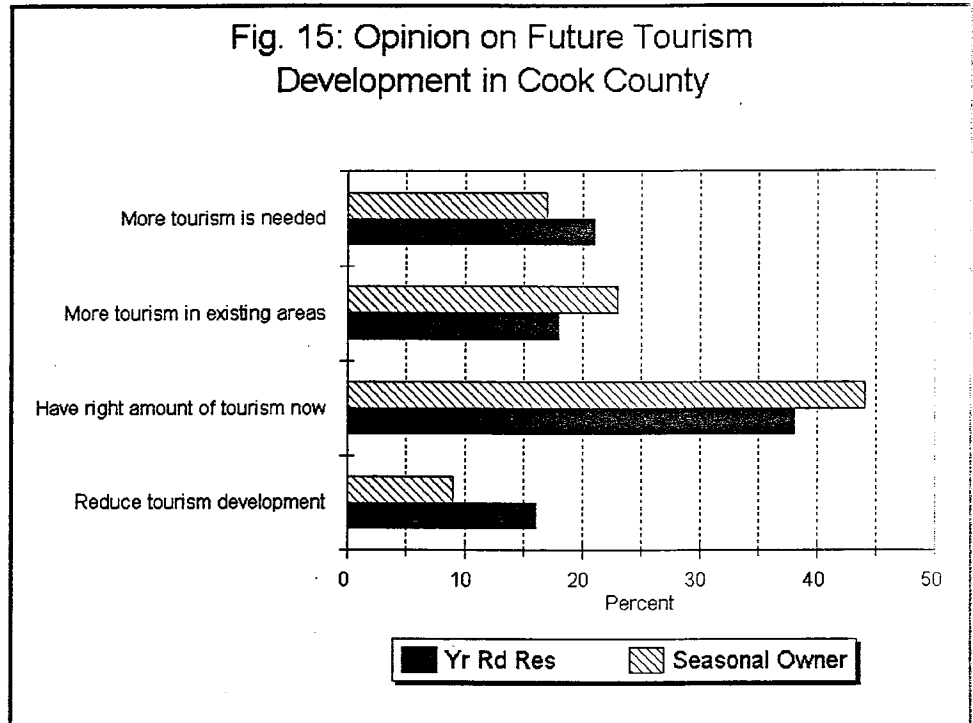
- While the awkward wording of the question on possible adverse factors on Cook County's qualities limited its value, the degradation of natural features and loss of quiet are seen as major negative forces.
- Of the factors listed, continued increases in property taxes are seen as the greatest threat to economic conditions followed by the lack of affordable housing and then rising property values.
- The majority of respondents favor the slow population growth rate offered in the survey. About a third of year-round residents, though, split between support for slower (or no growth) and faster growth.



- The large amount of public land in Cook County is seen by the majority of respondents as positively contributing to the character of the county and its economic base. Roughly 25% of year-round residents feel this land constrains economic development and less than one-quarter support a shift of some public land to private ownership. The desire for this shift is strongest on the Gunflint Trail and in the West End but even there less than 30% favor such a move.



- The largest block of year-round (38%) and seasonal respondents (44%) favor the current level of tourism development. About one-fifth of year-round residents support more tourism development throughout the county and another fifth would support more tourism development in existing tourism areas. A slightly lesser number of year-round residents want to see the level of development decrease. The longer residents have lived in the county the more divergent their positions on tourism become.



- Nearly 60% of owners of vacant seasonal property said they intend to build on their land. The rate is highest on inland lakes (74%) and Lake Superior (64%) and lower for non-lakeshore rural land.
- Respondents said that different parts of Cook County should be developed to different types and levels of development. East End residents generally favor slower overall growth rates. People in the West End and on the Gunflint Trail desire higher levels of private land ownership. The East End is less supportive of more tourism while the Gunflint Trail favors it.
- Respondents were evenly split regarding continuing the concept of lower service standards for remote, rural areas. People who live in areas likely to be designated as low service districts, had mixed responses— more supportive in Hovland, slightly less supportive around western inland lakes, and markedly less supportive along the Gunflint Trail.
- Survey responses seemed to affirm continued support for the concept of nodal development along the Highway 61 corridor. Respondents support development in the existing centers as opposed to along the corridor. Responses to the "no more" development option were evenly split for and against.

Support for new commercial development was uniform only for Grand

Marais. There was moderate support for small lot residential development in all listed community centers with slightly weaker support for Grand Portage. People residing in the centers had low levels of support for any more development within their own areas.

Respondents, especially those living in the centers, said that hiding development from view from the highway is not an adequate response to concern about corridor development.

- Over half of year-round residents see the lack of affordable housing as a significant issue. Half feel the County should encourage action but not invest public funds to provide housing. About 40% feel the private market will correct the situation while a third feel initiatives should be undertaken by non-profit entities. There was little support for requiring businesses to help finance affordable housing.

SUSTAINABILITY

During the fifteen years that elapsed between the first Cook County Land Use Plan and this edition, much new thought has taken place—at local, national and international levels—about the relatedness of our actions today, the future of human well-being and the link with the natural systems that create the context in which we conduct our lives. This expanding recognition of absolute human dependence upon healthy ecosystems is perhaps the single largest advance in human thought, on a global scale, over the last several decades. This concept now appears in many applications in economics, business, social services, physical development, and resource management under the term *sustainability*.

There is no universal definition for sustainability, however one example that reflects the fundamental concept is by Paul Hawken, businessman and author:

Sustainability is an economic state where the demands placed upon the environment by people and commerce can be met without reducing the capacity of the environment to provide for future generations.

In other words, if an activity is truly sustainable, for all practical purposes it can continue forever. Confusion can arise when the term is linked to actions such as "sustainable growth", "sustainable development" or "sustainable use." Sometimes these terms are used as if they are interchangeable. "Sustainable growth" is a contradiction in terms—nothing can grow indefinitely, while "sustainable use" as might be applied to agriculture or other renewable resources, is a rate of consumption that is within the capacity for renewal.

Another important factor in defining whether or not an action or set of actions is "sustainable" relates to the scale of the area being considered. At very small scales, it is difficult to make actions sustainable—something is sacrificed in almost every process or activity. At larger scales, where there is greater room for balancing actions, the concept has more meaningful application.

In the formation of the Cook County Land Use Plan, for immediate use as well as guidance into the next century, the concept of sustainability, if not the specific term, was present in ideas and reactions from the general public and the Task Force. These ideas are laced throughout the following chapters of this Plan to guide public decisions towards that end.

Cook County tends to be a place where people are not bashful about presenting

their ideas and getting involved, as witnessed by the highest voter turnout by county in Minnesota for the recent election. Residents' comments suggest they understand that sustainability is not a static condition that once achieved will continue without effort. It is a process that is as much economic, political, and social as it is environmental and scientific. Aspiring to sustainability requires broad systemic buy-in, thereby making solid public understanding and support absolutely vital. Sustainable communities are not created by proclamation, fiat or regulation. They are the reflection of shared values and, perhaps most important, day-to-day behavior that is congruent with those values.

For additional detail on the common ground information used to develop this plan readers are encouraged to secure copies of these working papers from the County Planning and Zoning Office:

- ❖ *A Sense of Place* (accepted by the Task Force on February 15, 1996);
- ❖ *Population and Demographics* (accepted February 15, 1996);
- ❖ *The Economy* (accepted March 14, 1996);
- ❖ *Changes in Land Use* (accepted March 14, 1996);
- ❖ *Community Attitude Survey* (accepted January 14, 1996);
- ❖ *Ecological Framework* (accepted July 18, 1996).