

Adopted January 24, 2022

TOWN OF GNESEN, MINNESOTA

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

This page is intentionally left blank.

Contents

Introduction and Planning Context	1
Vision and Themes	3
Communications Technology.....	9
Land Use and Zoning	10
Transportation.....	17
Housing.....	21
Natural and Agricultural Resources.....	23
Recreation and Community Center.....	24
Community and Governance.....	26
Appendix A: Public Visioning Report.....	31
Appendix B: Community Survey Results.....	

Gnesen Township Planning and Zoning Commission

Matt Thibodeau, Commission Chair

Carter Williams

Joe Ferguson

Richard DeLano

Nick Lepak

Peter Bergman

Kathy Buran

Kevin Middleton

Sarah Blix, Commission Secretary

Nathan Horyza, Zoning Officer

We would like to thank Kathy Buran, Richard Haney, Carter Williams, Nick Lepak, Sarah Blix and Diana Brainard for serving on a subcommittee to finalize the plan in the summer and fall of 2021.

This plan was prepared by ARDC Planning, a division of Arrowhead Regional Development Commission (ARDC), a regional planning and development agency serving the counties of Aitkin, Carlton, Cook, Itasca, Koochiching, Lake and St. Louis in Northeast Minnesota. ARDC Planning serves as a regional and community planning consultant working to further northeast Minnesota as a great place to live, work, play, and learn. Learn more at www.ardcplanning.org



Introduction and Planning Context

This Comprehensive Plan document addresses the Town of Gnesen, seeking to identify ways for the community to reach its vision of the future. The Town of Gnesen contracted with ARDC Planning, a division of the Arrowhead Regional Development Commission, to complete a Comprehensive Plan. A comprehensive plan is a tool that communities can use to decide how best to use resources and allocate services in the future to achieve a desired community vision. The plan is a guide which defines the tone and direction for Gnesen Township but within which there is considerable and necessary room for interpretation and discretion as times and circumstances demand. Comprehensive plans also serve as powerful legal documents that provide the justification and foundation for decisions regarding planning, zoning, subdivision, and general development for the next several years to achieve the community's long-term vision.

Planning Process

Town Board Process Review: ARDC staff met with the Town Board in September 2019 to review the purpose, content, and planning process for the Comprehensive Plan.

Public Visioning Meeting: ARDC staff facilitated a public visioning process at the Gnesen Town Hall in October 2019. Attendees participated in exercise to identify Assets (Current Strengths), Opportunities (Future Strengths), and Issues (Weaknesses and Threats) for the Township to begin developing a vision statement for the Comprehensive Plan. The results of the Visioning Meeting are included in Appendix A.

Community Survey: At the November meeting, the Planning Commission expressed that it did not believe there was broad enough participation at the Public Visioning Meeting and wanted to attempt to gather more public input to aid in the development of the Comprehensive Plan. The Planning Commission proposed adding a survey to the process and heavily promoting said survey. The Planning Commission approved a Comprehensive Plan Survey at its December 2019 meeting. A notice announcing the survey was included in the December newsletter and a postcard with the survey purpose and link to the Survey Monkey website was sent out after New Year's. A link was posted on the Township website and paper copies were made available on request. A reminder notice was included in the January newsletter. The survey remained open through February 10, 2020. The survey resulted in 235 responses – 223 via the web and 13 paper copies.

Community Survey Review: ARDC staff reviewed the survey results with the Planning Commission in February 2020. The survey and survey results are included in Appendix B.

Issue and Opportunity Review: After pausing meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic, ARDC staff met with Planning Commission to finalize the Vision Statement and discuss issues and opportunities around the main themes of the survey and public visioning results.

Draft Plan Review: ARDC Staff presented a draft plan based on the survey and visioning results.

Subcommittee Review: ARDC staff met with a subcommittee selected by the Planning Commission in the summer of 2021 to complete a draft plan for presentation to the Planning Commission and public.

Legal Foundation of Comprehensive Planning

The State of Minnesota gives its cities and townships the legal authority to regulate land use. The State does not require the creation of comprehensive plans for communities outside of the seven-county metropolitan area. However, it is recognized that a comprehensive plan is a valuable tool that a community can use to express its vision and develop strategies to fulfill that vision. The Municipal Planning Act (Chapter 462. Housing, Redevelopment, Planning, Zoning, 2006) creates a single, uniform procedure that applies to cities and townships. The comprehensive plan provides the legal foundation to enact land use controls and other municipal actions to implement long-term growth and development strategies and regulations. The community's land use (zoning) ordinances and official zoning map should be updated to conform to the Comprehensive Plan pursuant to adoption.

Community History

"Gnesen Township was founded in 1850 by a group of Polish settlers. They arrived in what is now known as Gnesen Township to take up a homestead. The name Gnesen came from a town in Poland-Gnesena, which means 'the nesting place'.

Some of the early settlers in Gnesen Township were Martin Lepak, Frank Trader, Martin Kuseniarek, John Novak, Johan Grames, Mr. LaBud and Mr. Kaminsky.

The towns of Herman, Rice Lake and Gnesen were organized with the assistance of George Bergman, the auditor of St. Louis County. Elected officials of the Town of Gnesen were Martin Kuseniarek as Chairman; Henry Musolf as Clerk and Martin Lepak as assessor. Town meetings were held first in the Musolf home and later at Lepak's home. The original town hall structure was built in 1894 and another structure was built in 1974. The current townhall is in the Gnesen Community Center which was previously the Gnesen school.

The Polish settlers of Gnesen were filled with joy when the residents of Rice Lake were able to cut a road through their township, now called the Rice Lake Road, all the way to the south line of Gnesen Township. The Lepak home also housed the area's first rural Post Office. The delivery of mail came from Fond du Lac to Gnesen to the Range. In 1969 Dominic Lepak donated the Post Office desk to the Duluth Historical Society." – Gnesen Town Website, Gnesen.org

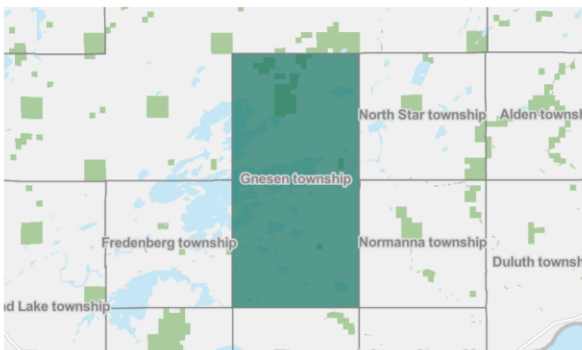
Current Context

The Town of Gnesen is in southern St. Louis County, Minnesota. According to the Census Bureau (2019 ACS) 2,033 people call Gnesen their home. Gnesen is located 12 miles north of Duluth, Minnesota and is best known for the number of lakes within the township limits. Of these lakes, Island Lake, is the largest covering more than 8600 acres and running more than 9 miles in length. Other lakes include Boulder, Cameron, Eagle, Horseshoe Jacob’s, Mirror, Schultz, Sunshine, and Thompson. Gnesen is a rare double section township. Gnesen covers approximately 72 square miles of wooded country. However, in addition to the numerous trees, many farms and lakes can be found in the township. Approximately 21 percent of Gnesen’s area is covered by lakes and rivers and 54 percent is held by the State of Minnesota through tax forfeiture and state forests. All together 75 percent of Gnesen’s land is non-taxable.

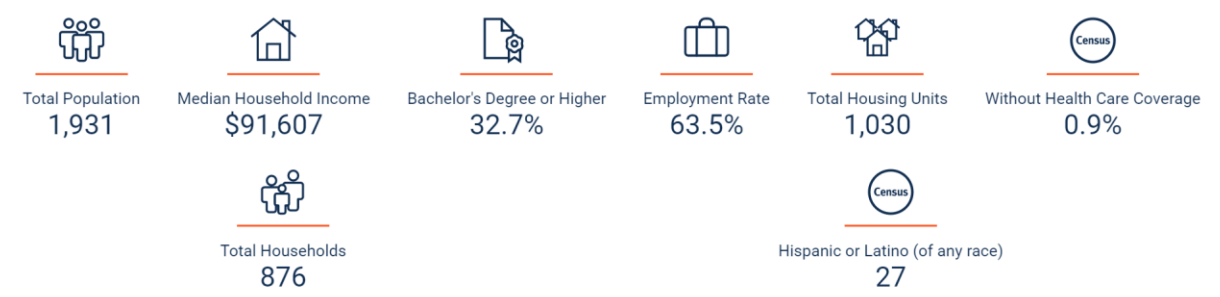
Community Snapshot

Gnesen township, St. Louis County, Minnesota

Place in St. Louis County, Minnesota



Gnesen township, St. Louis County, Minnesota is a city, town, place equivalent, and township located in St. Louis County, Minnesota. Gnesen township, St. Louis County, Minnesota has a land area of 62.9 square miles.



Vision and Themes

Vision Statement

Gnesen Township is a safe, sustainable, family-friendly, rural community with an effective local government. Residents and visitors have access to the latest communication technologies, ample recreation, services, and community activities and business opportunities.

Achieving this vision will require balancing many factors in a sustainable manner. What does sustainable mean?

In its simplest form, sustainable progress means making sure that our actions today will provide us with the kind of life we want to live in the future (New Jersey Future n.d.).

The value added of the concept of sustainability, above and beyond the social, economic, and environmental concerns that make it up, is that it forces us to recognize links and trade-offs, rather than dealing with each concern independently. To achieve sustainability, we need to sustain our economy, protect our environment, and achieve our social goals—ideally without trading off one goal for another (Hecht 2007)

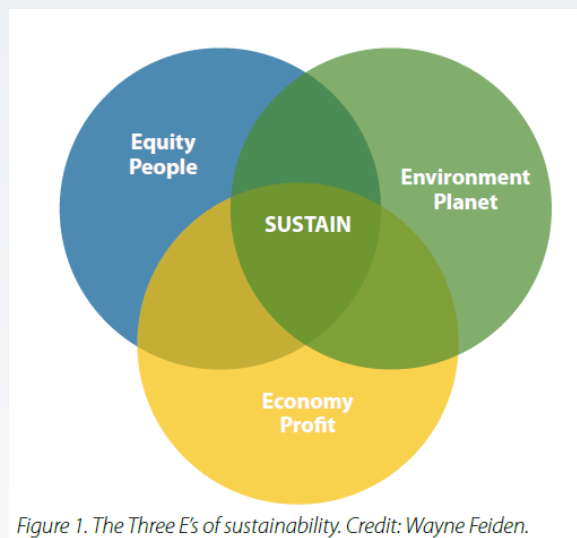


Figure 1. The Three E's of sustainability. Credit: Wayne Feiden.

Themes

- Access to the Latest Communications Technology.
- Support Well Planned Development of Commercial Uses and Areas
- Maintain Rural Character
- Strong, Safe, Family Friendly Community
- Well Managed and Responsive Government
- Promote Recreational Opportunities
- Conservation
- Quality Transportation System

Theme | Access to the Latest Communications Technology

Goal | Gnesen Township will support the greater access to modern communications systems including broadband internet, cellular, and other systems in the township.

Context | Poor internet (and cell service) was the most common survey response to the question “things you dislike about living in Gnesen”, the number one response to “things you would change” and the fourth most common top priority for the future. Visioning participants also identified high speed internet as an important part of Gnesen’s future. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the recognition that broadband internet is a necessity and not just a luxury for homes, businesses and workers, schools, and local government.

Theme | Support Well Planned Development of Commercial Uses and Areas

Goal | Gnesen Township will support commercial development that support the township’s quality of life and rural character.

Context | Survey and visioning session participants desire more commercial services in the township especially convenience services (gas, grocery, hardware), restaurants and waterfront services and accommodations. Both groups believed commercial uses should remain focused where there is good transportation access and limited conflicts with neighboring land uses.

Theme | Maintain Rural Character

Goal | Gnesen Township will maintain the rural character of the township through its planning and development regulations.

Context | Quiet/peaceful, rural, country living, and privacy were common words survey respondents used to describe the best reasons for living in Gnesen. 60 percent of respondents were comfortable with how Gnesen had developed the past ten years and 60 percent want the population to be about the same in 20 years. 52 percent of respondents* believed non-lakeshore lots should be a minimum of 4.5 acres. Visioning responses were similar though there was more discussion of flexibility around development and housing types.

Rural Character

Rural can mean different things to different people so it is important to establish a baseline definition. The State of Washington offers a definition of “Rural character” as the patterns of land use and development established by a county in the Rural Element of the comprehensive plan [RCW 36.70A.030(14)]:

- a) In which open space, the natural landscape, and vegetation predominate over the built environment;
- b) That foster traditional rural lifestyles, rural-based economies, and opportunities to both live and work in rural areas;
- c) That provide visual landscapes that are traditionally found in rural areas and communities;
- d) That are compatible with the use of the land by wildlife and for fish and wildlife habitat;
- e) That reduce the inappropriate conversion of undeveloped land into sprawling, low-density development.

Thurston County, Washington translated those elements into: “Rural areas are characterized by a balance between the natural environment and human uses with low density residential dwellings, farms, forests, mining areas, outdoor recreation and other open space activities.”

Commercial uses will be small in scale and will provide convenience services to the rural neighborhood. Industrial uses will generally be those that are related to and dependent on natural resources such as agriculture, timber or minerals.

Home-based businesses may be allowed throughout the rural area provided they do not adversely affect the surrounding residential uses.”

Theme | Strong, Safe, Family Friendly Community

Goal | Gnesen Township is a welcoming community where neighbors support each other.

Context | Survey respondents and visioning meeting attendees believed there is a strong sense of community. Good neighbors were the second most common survey response as to the best reasons for living in Gnesen. Public safety services and community safety overall are important to the respondents as are community activities. A need for more childcare options were identified in the survey and visioning meeting.

Theme | Well Managed and Responsive Government

Goal | Gnesen Township will provide responsive and efficient government services.

Context | Visioning participants identified growing the tax base to provide adequate services, a strategic growth plan to manage that growth and investment, and well-maintained roads as priorities. 63 percent of survey respondents felt the road conditions were “good” and 55 percent felt that opportunities for biking, walking, and other modes of transportation were meeting their expectations. Well maintained roads were the number one response to what should be the Townships highest long-term priority and low/lower taxes as the ninth.

Theme | Promote Recreational Opportunities

Goal | Gnesen Township will support the health and quality of life of the community by maintaining, enhancing, and when appropriate expanding local and regional recreational opportunities.

Context | Outdoor recreation, lakes, and nature/beauty were among the top reasons for living in Gnesen as identified by survey respondents. 75 percent supported investing tax dollars to provide recreation facilities and programs. A fitness center and classes, non-motorized trails, and athletic courts and fields were the top three recreational opportunities that the respondents felt were needed. Visioning meeting responses focused on providing more outdoor recreation opportunities and creating partnerships to do that. Almost 50 percent of respondents believed the Township should work with other groups to provide recreational and environmental learning opportunities to attract visitors to the township.

Theme | Conservation

Goal | Gnesen Township will conserve important natural resources to preserve the rural quality of life.

Context | Visioning meeting participants identified preserving natural areas and water quality through partnerships with other governments and groups, less light pollution, focusing on ecological harmony, and promoting agricultural areas. 72 percent of survey respondents were satisfied with the existing agricultural in the township. 73 percent of respondents believed Gnesen should identify and reserve areas as open space or environmentally sensitive areas, generally around lakes and rivers. Almost 50 percent of respondents believed the Township should work with other groups to provide recreational and environmental learning opportunities to attract visitors to the township.

Theme | Quality Roads

Goal | Gnesen Township will continue to provide well maintained roads.

Context | Sixty-three percent of survey respondents felt the road conditions were “good” and 55 percent felt that opportunities for biking, walking, and other modes of transportation were meeting their expectations. Well maintained roads were the number one response to what should be the Townships highest long-term priority.

Communications Technology

Access to the modern communications technology is an issue that cuts across many of the elements of the community life. High speed internet and telecommunications access influences economic development, housing and residency choices, access to services and education, public safety and emergency response, and governmental operations are all impacted by availability of modern communications technology. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the recognition that broadband internet is a necessity and not just a luxury for homes, businesses and workers, schools, and local government. Trends that were accelerated by the pandemic will continue to impact the Township especially the ability or need to work from home, which is different from running a home occupation.

Poor internet (and cell service) was the most common survey response to the question “things you dislike about living in Gnesen”, the number one response to “things you would change” and the fourth most common top priority for the future. Visioning participants also identified high speed internet as an important part of Gnesen’s future. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the recognition that broadband internet is a necessity and not just a luxury for homes, businesses and workers, schools, and local government.

The Planning Commission has deliberatively chosen to use the term “modern communications technology” in place of terms for specific technologies because it recognizes the fast-changing nature of field.

Goal | Gnesen Township will support greater access to modern communications systems including internet, cellular, and other systems in the township.

Strategies:

CT1: Work with broadband service providers and regional and state organizations and governments to expand communications technology access.

CT2: Support efforts to increase funding for communications technology deployment.

CT3: Provide community members with updates on programs and new opportunities to access communications technology.

Land Use and Zoning

Introduction

The Town of Gnesen is in southern St. Louis County, Minnesota. There are many lakes in the township. Of these lakes, Island Lake, is the largest covering more than 8,600 acres and running more than 9 miles in length. Other lakes include Boulder, Cameron, Eagle, Horseshoe Jacob's, Mirror, Schultz, Sunshine, and Thompson. Gnesen is a rare double section township. Gnesen covers approximately 72 square miles of wooded country. However, in addition to the numerous trees, many farms and lakes can be found in the township.

The largest owner of lands within the township is the State of Minnesota through tax forfeit lands, 45 percent, and Cloquet Valley State Forest, nine percent. These lands are concentrated in the northern and eastern parts of the township. They provide recreation and forestry resources. Limited access is available via logging roads and trails. Little housing and other development are present in the northern part of the township.

Minnesota Power (Allete) is a large property owner. Minnesota Power's lands adjoin Island Lake and Boulder Lake Reservoirs, which are part of Minnesota Power's hydroelectric system. In keeping with federal regulations Minnesota Power maintains part of these lands for public recreation purposes including boat launches, fishing docks, and camp sites. Much of the rest of the lands are held by permanent and seasonal residences. Minnesota Power's future ownership plans involve maintaining a small ribbon of land around the shores of the reservoirs in accordance with federal regulations.

Private property is primarily located around Island Lake and south of Normanna Road. Land use is characterized by residential use along main County and Township roads, around lakes, and agricultural use spread throughout the southern part of the township. Commercial land uses are located along four different areas along County Highway 4 (Rice Lake Road).

Survey and visioning session participants desire more commercial services in the township especially convenience services (gas, grocery, hardware), restaurants and waterfront services and accommodations. The most common response to where commercial development should be encouraged or allowed was along major throughfares like Rice Lake Road.

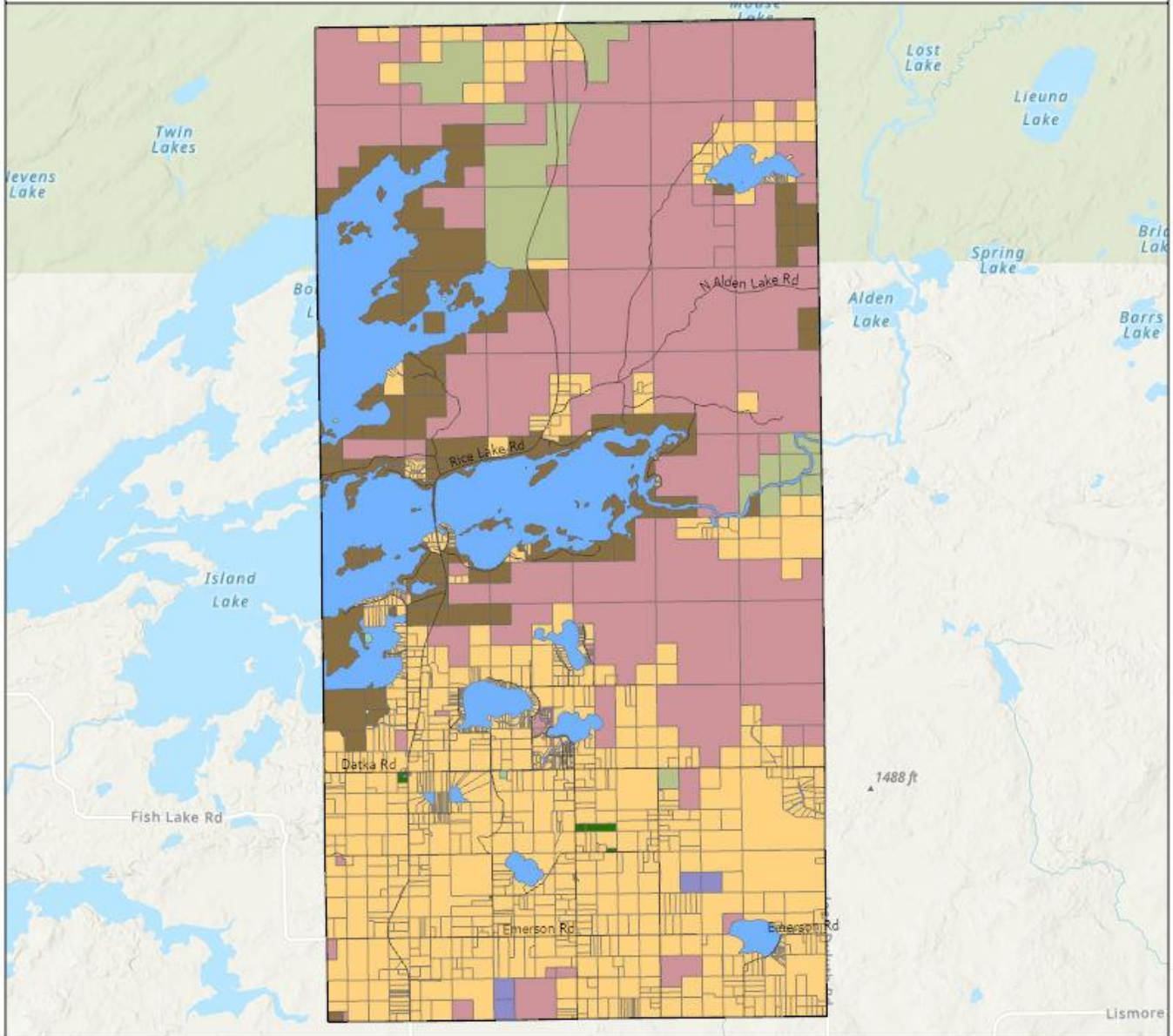
Quiet/peaceful, rural, country living, and privacy were common words survey respondents used to describe the best reasons for living in Gnesen. 60 percent of respondents were comfortable with how Gnesen had developed the past ten years and 60 percent want the population to be about the same in 20 years. 52 percent of respondents* believed non-lakeshore lots should be a minimum of 4.5 acres. Visioning responses were similar, though there was more discussion of flexibility around development and housing types.

Industrial use includes forestry and logging operations on State lands and gravel pits. There are seven permitted and one non-permitted active gravel and aggregate pits in operation as of 2020. Six pits were located south of Normanna Road and one south of Island Lake along Rice Lake Road.

Visioning participants discussed regulating gravel and logging operations to mitigate negative impacts on traffic and roads. Road conditions, traffic, and gravel pits were among the top ten concerns identified by survey respondents. While 70 percent of respondents felt road conditions were good (63 percent) or excellent (7 percent), having well maintained roads was the number one response to the highest priorities question. Majorities of respondents indicated that their properties were affected by noise and truck traffic from gravel mining.

Land Ownership

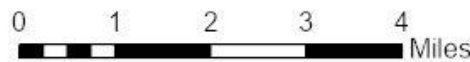
Gnesen Township, Minnesota



Ownership

- State
- County Fee
- Tax Forfeit
- Municipal
- Unknown
- Private
- Allete Inc.
- Lakes

Ownership	Number Of Lots	Total Acres
State	28	4030.47
County Fee	7	164.71
Tax Forfeit	119	20973.98
Municipal	8	45.89
Unknown	24	20.38
Private	1506	17197.98
Allete Inc.	122	5248.95



Sources: ARDC Planning 2020 | Sources: CLP, DEED, US Census Bureau, MNDOT, ESRI

Residential Land Use

Gnesen Township has continued to grow its population significantly greater than the region. About one third of the Town’s housing units have been added since the year 2000. Of that, half of the new units are considered seasonal. Growth has continued but slowed from 2010-2018 compared to the previous decade. Gnesen Township has continued to grow its housing stock, though at a slower pace from 2010-2018 than it did the previous decade. Seasonal residences far outpaced nonseasonal growth since 2000 but that ratio flipped since 2010.

Gnesen Township Housing Summary				
Year	Households	Housing Units	Nonseasonal	Seasonal
2000	582	689	596	93
2010	686	922	714	208
2017	745	1037	783	254
00-10 Change	104	233	118	115
00-10 % Change	18%	34%	20%	124%
10-17 Change	59	115	69	46
10-17 % Change	9%	12%	10%	22%

Source: American Community Survey, 2017, www.data.census.gov

Commercial Land Use

Less than one percent (424 acres) of Gnesen Township is commercially zoned. Approximately 184 acres are zoned HC – Highway Commercial and 239 acres are zoned SC – Shoreland Commercial. ARDC Planning analyzed commercial land use by assessing what parcels had building value associated with them in the St. Louis County GIS database. This analysis showed that parcels totaling 44 acres in the HC zone were vacant. This equals about 24 percent of the district. Parcels totaling 152 acres in the SC zone were vacant. This is equals about 64 percent of the district. Many of the developed properties in the commercial zones are residential.

Zoning and Land Use Regulations

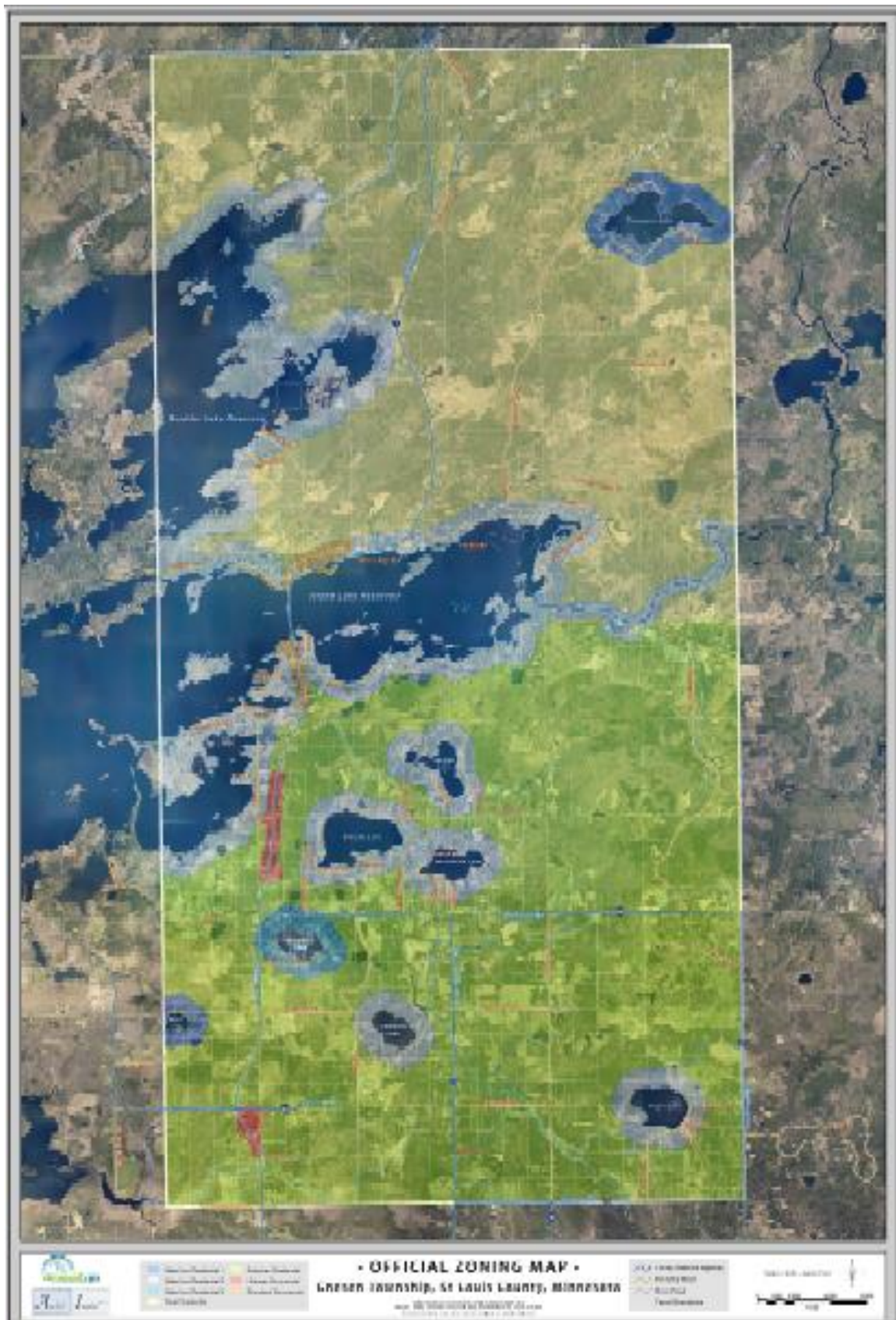
Gnesen Township administers its own land use ordinance. The ordinance is based on St. Louis County's ordinance with additional provisions to address specific town issues. The ordinance was last updated in 2018.

As directed by Minn. Stat. § 394.33, subd. 1 the official land use controls of the Town shall not be inconsistent with or less restrictive than the standards prescribed in the official controls adopted by the county. The Town may adopt official controls, including shoreland regulations which are more restrictive than provided in the controls adopted by the county.

The zoning ordinance establishes eight zoning districts with seven currently being used to zone land.

- Lands adjoining and around the many lakes are zoned to conform to the lake's designation as a natural environment, recreational development, or general development body of water. The minimum lot size ranges from 1 acre for riparian lots to 4.5 acres for non-riparian lots.
- Most of the non-shorelands south of Island Lake are zoned Suburban Residential. The minimum lot size is 4.5 acres and 300 feet in width.
- Non-shorelands north of Island Lake are zoned Rural Residential. The minimum lots size is 9 acres and 300 feet in width.
- Commercial properties along County Highway 4 are zoned Highway Commercial or Shoreland Commercial.

The appropriate amount of zoning regulation and blight were two common issues identified by survey respondents. In general, respondents felt that current lot standards were about right and would like to see more businesses. 83 percent did not believe the Township should actively encourage industrial development. 90 percent thought home-based businesses should continue to be allowed. 58 percent believed that short-term rental should be allowed. Visioning meeting participants wanted flexible, well thought out zoning and a manageable plan for enforcement including a nuisance ordinance. They also wanted to review basic dimensional and use requirements and address criteria for vacation rentals.



Goal Statement: Gnesen Township will maintain its rural development pattern and existing community aesthetic primarily characterized by single family housing and current development densities. New development will be well planned to maintain the rural character, conserve the natural environment, and provide flexibility to provide housing and services that meet the need of all residents.

Strategies:

LU1: Maintain the existing residential lot area requirements or overall density of the zoning district if using conservation development.

LU2: Commercial uses (not including home businesses) should remain in commercially zoned areas of a rural scale and nature.

LU3: Home-based businesses will be allowed throughout the township provided they do not adversely affect the surrounding residential uses or damage the environment.

LU4: Support family farms and traditional agricultural uses.

LU5: Consider adopting a Conservation Subdivision to maintain open space, conserve natural amenities, and preserve rural character while allowing creative development and maintaining overall density requirements through clustering.

Goal Statement: Gnesen Township will support commercial uses in commercially zoned areas and home-based businesses that support the township's quality of life and rural character.

Strategies:

LU6: When considering designation of commercially zoned areas the Town will assess the following: inventory of existing commercial properties, adequate road access, compatibility with rural character, types of future commercial uses and impact on natural resources. Expansion or reallocation could be appropriate. Commercial sprawl is discouraged.

LU7: Work with existing (and future) commercial property owners and users to identify opportunities for commercial development serving permanent and seasonal residents and visitors by sharing survey results and promoting local services.

LU8: Support development of the Commercial Shoreland zones that are consistent with the Comprehensive Plan's goals for commercial and recreational uses.

Goal Statement: Gnesen Township will work to mitigate impacts of industrial development that would degrade the rural character of the township, quality of life, and services.

Strategies:

LU9: Ensuring that the land use ordinances and Town policies mitigate impacts of industrial development that would degrade the rural character of the township.

LU10: Enforcing compliance with the zoning and subdivision ordinance to prevent or correct zoning violations.

Goal Statement: Gnesen Township will use zoning and other Township powers to implement the Comprehensive Plan, maintain rural character, and quality of life.

Strategies:

LU11: Ensure that the land use ordinances and Town policies mitigate impacts of industrial development that would degrade the rural character of the township, impact infrastructure, and degrade the environment.

LU12: Enforce compliance with the zoning and subdivision ordinance to prevent or correct zoning violations.

LU13: Explore adopting a blight/nuisance ordinance to supplement zoning enforcement powers.

Conservation Subdivision

The Comprehensive Plan identifies the use of conservation subdivisions as a potential tool for the Township to use to achieve several of the Plan's goals and strategies. The following is a general-purpose explanation of the concept, development, and use of conservation subdivision.

A conservation subdivision is a residential subdivision that devotes large portions of potentially buildable land area to undivided, permanently protected open space. In contrast, conventional subdivisions devote all, or nearly all, buildable land area to individual lots and streets. Conservation subdivision design can help communities implement a network of permanently protected natural areas.

In rural areas, conservation subdivisions offer several advantages to communities over conventional subdivisions. They provide more habitat for wildlife, filter and retain more stormwater runoff, require less new infrastructure, and better maintain a rural sense of place. When developers link open space areas to the open spaces of adjacent subdivisions, conservation subdivisions can contribute to a network of environmental corridors, also known as a green infrastructure network, within or between communities. Conservation subdivisions do not, however, stop urban expansion or reduce automobile dependency.

To maximize the benefits of conservation subdivision design, communities often identify the environmental and cultural resources or features they want to protect from new development. Many cities and counties identify these resources or features during a comprehensive, open space, or green infrastructure plan-making process. Some features, such as floodplains, wetlands, and steep slopes, may already be protected from new development by existing development regulations. These "primary" conservation features are the community's highest priorities for conservation. Other "secondary" conservation features and resources are vulnerable to new development. These often include mature woodlands and individual large trees, historic sites and structures, wildlife habitat, prime farmland, groundwater recharge areas, riparian corridors, and scenic viewsheds.

After a community has identified the features and resources it wants to protect from future development, planners and local officials must update the community's zoning and subdivision regulations to require or incentivize conservation subdivision design, either community wide or in certain areas. Typically, this means adopting new provisions that establish conservation subdivision design as a distinct alternative to conventional subdivision design. These provisions must specify permissible locations for conservation subdivisions, whether conservation subdivision design is required or voluntary, the minimum percentage of the site that must be maintained as protected open space, and permissible deviations from zoning and subdivision standards specifying lot sizes, frontages, setbacks, and street widths. These regulations generally permit developers to create the same number of buildable lots as a conventional subdivision.

Conservation Subdivision (Continued)

Conservation subdivision regulations typically require developers to follow a four-step design process. The first step is identifying conservation areas by overlaying maps of the community's primary and secondary conservation priorities onto a map of the development site and conducting a site analysis to precisely locate these features and resources. Next, developers select individual home sites based on permissible density and a desire to maximize views of and access to the protected open space. Then, developers connect the home sites and accessible open spaces with streets and trails. Finally, developers establish lot lines for each home site.

These regulations must also specify the permissible methods for permanently protecting open spaces. Common methods include conservation easements held by either a land trust or the local government and permanent restrictive covenants. Additionally, conservation subdivision regulations must address responsibilities for open space ownership and maintenance. In many cases, these regulations assign ownership of protected open spaces to a homeowner association and require developers to submit a management plan that details responsibilities and guidelines for maintenance.

Conservation subdivision design can help communities protect vulnerable natural and cultural features and resources from new development. Furthermore, when developers widely embrace this approach as an alternative to conventional subdivision design, it can be a valuable tool to help communities establish a local or regional green infrastructure network. To realize and maximize these benefits, communities must explicitly authorize conservation subdivisions in their development regulations and provide education and assistance to communicate the potential trade-offs associated with developing or owning property in conservation subdivisions and to build the technical capacity to embrace new subdivision design techniques.

The above was adapted from the Planners Advisory Service Quicknotes No. 81, American Planning Association, 2019.

When considering a Conservation Subdivision Ordinance communities offer consider the following when determining if a conservation subdivision ordinance provides desired businesses:

- Determine conservation priorities such as preservation of water resources, minimizing roads, minimal tree cutting.
- Determine where conservation subdivision may be used.
- Determine variations allowed (lot area, lot dimensions).
- Determine amount of required open space or preservation.

Transportation

Introduction

Transportation includes infrastructure for many types of modes, including motor vehicle, bus, bicycle, foot, mobility assistive device, boat, plane, train, etc. Providing connections between homes, businesses, employers, recreation opportunities, and more, transportation is an important part of the comprehensive plan.

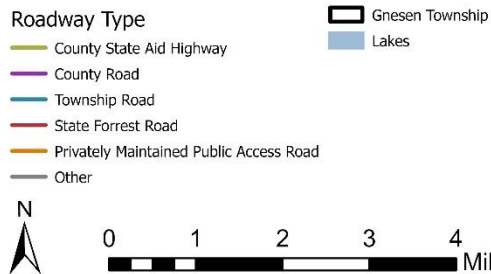
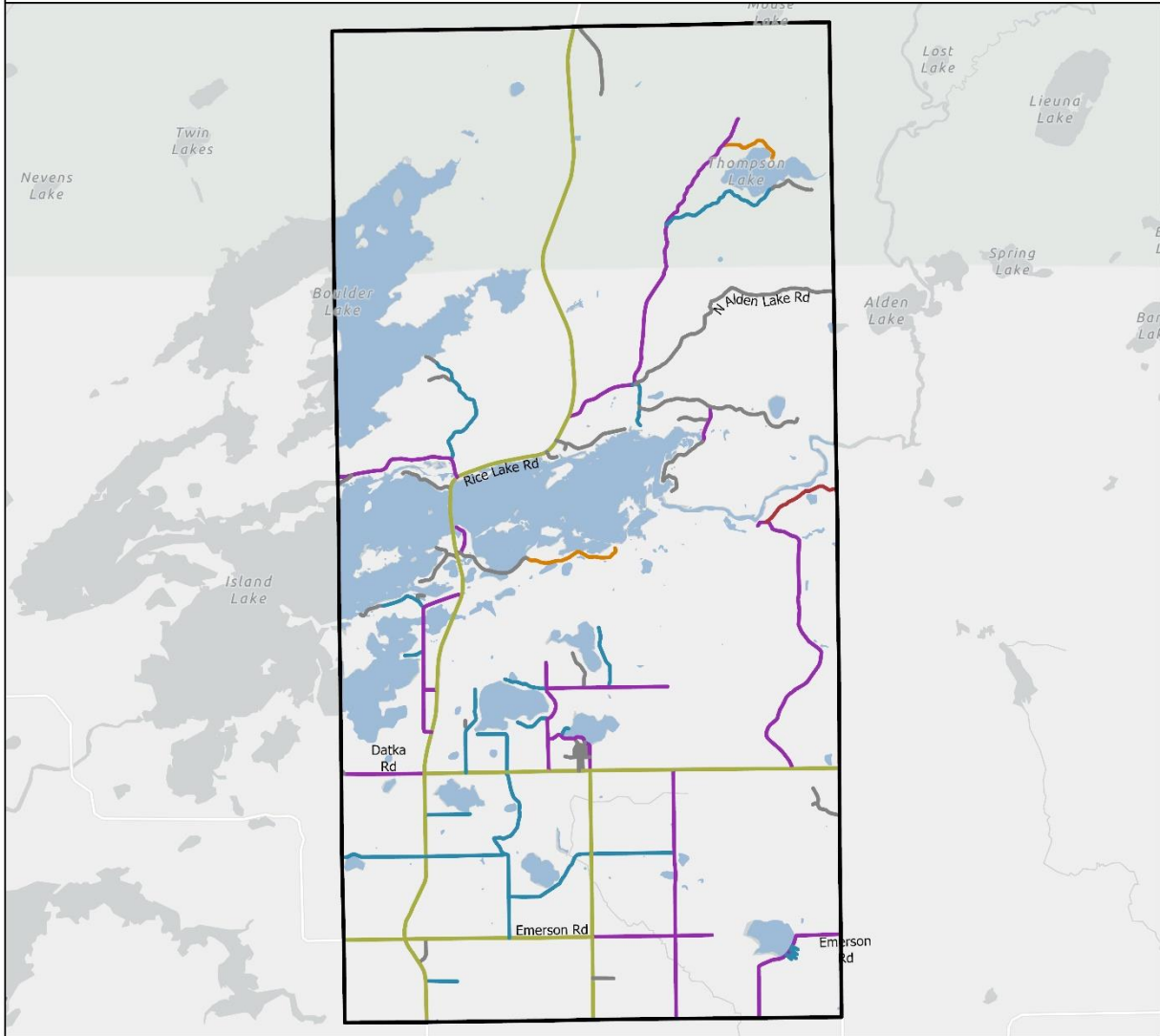
Gnesen's location near Duluth is an important factor in the town's quality of life. The City provides employment and services to Gnesen's residents. The many lakes and recreation opportunities draw visitors from around the area. Most visitors to Island and Boulder Lakes will utilize County Highway 4. 88 percent of the Town's 1,127 workers commuted via automobile and had an average commute time of 25 minutes. 6.8 percent of workers reported working from home in 2017.

St. Louis County Roads provide important connections through the township. Highway 4/Rice Lake Road is the major north-south thoroughfare and Normanna Road is the principal east-west thoroughfare in the township. St. Louis County owns and maintains 50 miles of roadways.

The Township owns and maintains 15 miles of roads primarily serving residential and rural use areas. The town also contains several privately owned roads in the small number of platted areas.

Road Type By Ownership

Gnesen Township, Minnesota

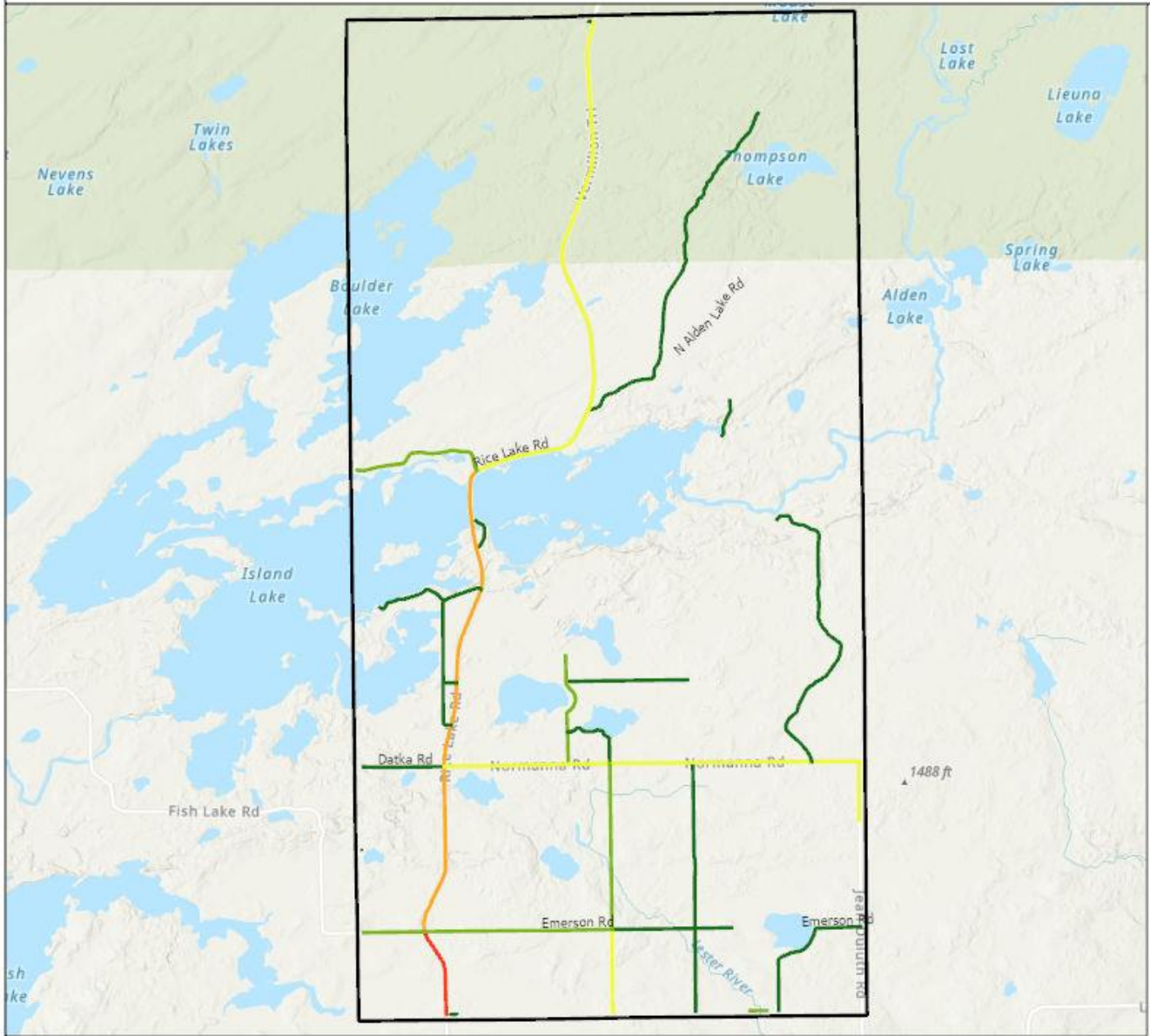


Roadway Type	Total Roadways	Total Mileage
County St Aid	8	25.3
County Rd	19	24.2
Township Rd	20	16.2
State Forest Rd	1	1
PMPAR	2	1.9
Other	28	16.3

Sources: ARDC Planning 2020 | Sources: CLP, DEED, US Census Bureau, MNDOT, ESRI

Daily Annual Traffic Averages

Gnesen Township, Minnesota



Sources: ARDC Planning 2020 | Sources: CLP, DEED, US Census Bureau, MNDOT, ESRI



Goal Statement: Gnesen Township will maintain a safe, efficient, and cost-effective transportation system.

Strategies:

T1: Maintain the Township's roads to a high-quality standard.

T2: Participate in the St. Louis County Capital Improvement Planning to ensure County road needs in the township are met.

T3: The Township may assume acceptance of a private road by Township Board decision with whatever conditions the Board approves.

T4: Explore alternative transportation opportunities such as bicycling and walking facilities.

T5: Work with surrounding communities and other partners to support transit services.

T6: Review transportation options, specifically for those in wheelchairs and with limited mobility, and collaborate with potential partners to enhance available services.

Housing

Introduction

Gnesen Township has continued to grow its population significantly greater than the region in the past two decades. About one third of the Town's housing units have been added since the year 2000. Of that, half of the new units are considered seasonal. Gnesen Township has continued to grow its housing stock, though at a slower pace from 2010-2018 than it did the previous decade. Seasonal residences far outpaced nonseasonal growth since 2000 but that ratio flipped since 2010 as available lake lots dropped. Residential development will continue to be limited unless land ownership changes. Development opportunities remain in the southern portion of the township, particularly in the Suburban zoning district.

The Township is aging. The median age was 50.2 years in 2017 versus 46.3 in 2010. The median age in the state at the same time was 37.9 years and 41 years in St. Louis County. An aging township raises the issue of providing housing and services that will allow residents to age in place and housing that will attract younger residents and families.

Visioning participants wanted to see a sustainable growth rate. New developments should be well planned (possibly maintaining larger lot sizes) and be competitively priced. The township should offer services and housing options to allow residents to age in place which will be needed to meet the needs of an aging population which will increase as the Baby Boomer residents continue to age.

Answers falling under the category of controlled growth were the fifth most common response to the township's highest priorities over the next 20 years (22 of 366 responses) in the survey. 60 percent of survey respondents wanted Gnesen to remain about the same population as it is now though 35 percent wanted it to be somewhat larger in the future. 98 percent of respondents believed the traditional single-family housing typology was appropriate. 35 percent responded that senior housing was appropriate.

Goal Statement: Gnesen Township will maintain its rural development pattern and existing community aesthetic primarily characterized by single family housing and current lot size standards. New development will be well planned to maintain the rural character and provide flexibility to provide housing and services that allow residents to age in place and conserve the natural environment.

Strategies:

H1: Maintain the existing residential lot size requirements or overall density if using conservation development.

H2: Support aging in place by supporting housing suitable to seniors .

H3: Support and encourage use of Federal, State, County, and non-profit programs that help maintain housing stock.

H4: Partner with and promote agencies that provide services to aging residents and their caregivers including Arrowhead Economic Opportunity Agency and Arrowhead Area Agency on Aging.

H5: Work with St. Louis County to ensure that septic and well systems are properly built to serve the type of use.

H5: Consider adopting a Conservation Subdivision ordinance to maintain open space, conserve natural amenities, and preserve rural character while allowing creative development while maintaining overall density and land use type requirements through clustering.

Natural and Agricultural Resources

Introduction

Gnesen covers approximately 72 square miles of forests and wetlands. However, in addition to the numerous trees, many farms and lakes can be found in the township. There are many lakes in the township. Of these lakes, Island Lake, is the largest covering more than 8600 acres and running more than 9 miles in length. Boulder, Cameron, Eagle, Horseshoe Jacob's, Mirror, Schultz, Sunshine, and Thompson.

The largest owner of lands within the township is the State of Minnesota through tax forfeit lands, 45 percent, and Cloquet Valley State Forest, nine percent. These lands are concentrated in the northern and eastern parts of the township. They provide recreation and forestry resources. Limited access is available via logging roads and trails. Little housing and other development are present in the northern part of the township.

Visioning meeting participants identified preserving natural areas and water quality through partnerships with other governments and groups, less light pollution, focusing on ecological harmony, and promoting agricultural areas. 72 percent of survey respondents were satisfied with the existing agriculture in the township. 73 percent of respondents believed Gnesen should identify and reserve areas as open space or environmentally sensitive areas, generally around lakes and rivers. Almost 50 percent of respondents believed the Township should work with other groups to provide recreational and environmental learning opportunities to attract visitors to the township.

Aggregate mining is the most significant industrial land use in the township. The number of active pits has varied over the years and was seven as of 2019. The Township carefully regulates aggregate mining through a conditional use permit with each one being reviewed on an annual basis. The Township requires a bond to ensure reclamation if pits become inactive.

Goal Statement: Gnesen Township will conserve important natural resources to preserve the quality of life.

Strategies:

NA1: Utilize the zoning ordinance and other Town policies to protect sensitive areas such as Shorelands and wetlands.

NA2: The Township will continue to carefully regulate aggregate mining through a conditional use permit with each one being reviewed on an annual basis. The Township will continue to require a bond to ensure reclamation if pits go inactive.

NA3: Work with St. Louis County and residents to ensure good management of septic systems and wellhead protection.

NA4: Explore intergovernmental and interorganizational partnerships with the State of Minnesota, St. Louis County, Minnesota Power, Boulder Lake Environmental Learning Center, and others to identify and conserve priority lands and provide environmental education.

NA5: Support family farms and traditional agricultural uses.

NA6: Consider adopting a Conservation Subdivision ordinance to maintain open space, conserve natural amenities, preserve agricultural lands while maintaining rural character while allowing creative development while maintaining overall density requirements through clustering.

Recreation and Community Center

Introduction

Gnesen Township offers a wide variety of recreational opportunities to residents and visitors alike. Much of the township's recreation is focused on its lakes, particularly Island and Boulder. Minnesota Power is required to maintain public recreational facilities as part of its hydroelectric system on Island and Boulder Lakes.

Outdoor recreation, lakes, and nature/beauty were among the top reasons for living in Gnesen as identified by survey respondents. 75 percent supported investing tax dollars to provide recreation facilities and programs. A fitness center and classes, non-motorized trails, and athletic courts and fields were the top three recreational opportunities that the respondents felt were needed. Visioning meeting responses focused on providing more outdoor recreation opportunities and creating partnerships to do that. Almost 50 percent of respondents believed the Township should work with other groups to provide recreational and environmental learning opportunities to attract visitors to the township.

Boulder Lake Environmental Learning Center is a unique resource. The Center offers fishing and boating, hiking, cross country skiing, snowmobiling, snowshoeing, wildlife viewing, and primitive camping. According to the Center's website:

"Boulder Lake Environmental Learning Center (BLELC) was established in 1994 and features a strong and unique partnership of University of Minnesota Duluth's College of Education and Human Service Professions, Minnesota Power, and Saint Louis County Land and Minerals Department.

Boulder Lake's 18,000-acre classroom is a regional leader in fostering connections to natural resource stewardship through education, research, and recreation. Annually BLELC and the outdoor recreation opportunities within its classroom serve more than 8,500 participants including K-12 students, college classes, post-graduate students, and community members from Northeast Minnesota, Northwest Wisconsin and areas across the upper-Midwest region. Boulder Lake's natural resources are managed by Minnesota Power, St. Louis County Land & Minerals Department, and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources."

Another important recreational and community facility is the Gnesen Community Center. The community center was originally built as the Gnesen School and is located at 6356 Howard Gnesen Road approximately 13 miles north of Duluth. The building has many great features including a gym, full commercial style kitchen, and several rooms for meetings. Outside are outdoor tennis courts, a skating rink, and a large playground. The parking lot is paved and has marked handicap parking close to the doors. The entire center or individual rooms can be rented to the public for events.

In 2020, a volunteer group of residents and University of Minnesota Duluth students constructed an interpretive nature trail, disc golf course, and playscape behind the Community Center.

Visioning participants wanted to see an active community center with many opportunities for residents. 75 percent of survey respondents supported investing tax dollars to provide recreation facilities and programs. A fitness center and classes were the number one request for facilities and programs. Other responses included keeping things as is, senior activities, and community education. When asked “if we have a recreational facility, where would you want it located”, 70 percent responded with the Community Center.

Goal Statement: Gnesen Township will support the health and quality of life of the community by maintaining, enhancing, and when appropriate expanding local and regional recreational opportunities.

Strategies:

RC1: Explore options for non-motorized trails.

RC2: Explore intergovernmental and interorganizational partnerships with the State of Minnesota, St. Louis County, Minnesota Power, Boulder Lake Environmental Learning Center, and others to provide outdoor recreational opportunities.

RC3: Explore options to improve recreational and community activities throughout the township.

RC4: Explore options to increase tourism and support businesses through increased recreational opportunities.

Goal Statement: Gnesen Township will support the Community Center as a hub of health, recreational, educational, civic, and community activities that strengthen the town bonds.

Strategies:

RC5: Maintain and improve as necessary the Community Center.

RC6: Support, enhance, and promote activities at the Community Center.

RC7: Explore facility expansions like a fitness center, commercial kitchen, and athletic courts in support of community health.

Community and Governance

Introduction

The planning process revealed a close-knit community. Survey respondents and visioning meeting attendees believed there is a strong sense of community. Good neighbors were the second most common survey response as to the best reasons for living in Gnesen. Public safety services and community safety overall are important to the respondents as are community activities. Gnesen residents are proud of their volunteer fire department and first responders. A need for more childcare options were identified in the survey and visioning meeting.

Visioning participants identified growing the tax base to provide adequate services, a strategic growth plan to manage that growth and investment, and well-maintained roads as priorities.

Visioning participants identified a need for a plan to actively engage the citizenship, collaborate with stakeholders, and proactively work with Minnesota Power on lake shore usage. Several comments and attitudes expressed by survey respondents indicated a need for actions to improve local government – citizen relations.

Goal Statement: Gnesen Township is a welcoming community where neighbors support each other.

Strategies:

CG1: Continue to support community events, communications, and facilities that bring neighbors together.

CG2: Maintain a good working relationship with the St. Louis County Sheriff's Department.

CG3: Support the Gnesen Volunteer Fire Department and first responders to provide satisfactory levels of fire protection in the township.

Goal Statement: Gnesen Township will provide responsive and efficient government services.

Strategies:

CG4: Town leaders will act as responsible stewards, balancing long-term fiscal, environmental, and community well-being.

CG5: Gnesen Township will provide quality-rural services.

CG6: Gnesen Township work to ensure that existing facilities and infrastructure are well maintained.

CG7: Gnesen Township will communicate clearly and transparently with its residents.

CG8: Gnesen Township will continue to reach as many residents as possible through traditional and digital means including the official newspaper, monthly newsletter, website, other online media, and through postings of event notices at local establishments.

CG9: Gnesen Township will form strong intergovernmental and interorganizational relationships to benefit the Township and its residents.

Future Planning Issues

The Planning and Zoning Commission has identified issues that require additional study and planning. If the issues are to be addressed, they may be addressed by policy or ordinance changes and even by amending the Comprehensive Plan in the future. These issues are

- Short-term rentals
- Blight, junk, and nuisance
- Home businesses that expand into commercial enterprises

Appendix A: Public Visioning Report

Appendix B: Community Survey Results