

October 15, 2020

TO: Rice County Commissioners
Rice County Administrator
Rice County Question and Comment Address

Sent via Email

FR: Forest Economic Development Association

RE: Comprehensive Plan Input

The purpose of this letter is to provide input to the County from the Forest Economic Development Association (FEDA) regarding the 2040 Comprehensive Plan. FEDA is a 501(c)(4) nonprofit established to encourage all the members of our community to take a proactive role in working with the Rice County Board of Commissioners and the board of supervisors from each of our townships to determine what type of development would be compatible with and acceptable to the existing communities.

Developing a template for the next twenty years is an ambitious undertaking. FEDA thanks the staff and elected officials for work performed toward this goal. While much of the material developed has merit, FEDA has some concerns about the Plan process and the product. For reasons highlighted below, FEDA believes it is imperative that the industrial designation on the map be removed and that the County mount a reasonable effort to study the issue.

FEDA asserts that the process is flawed because following a negligible amount of citizen involvement in 2015 (less than one percent of the population attended the meetings), a draft plan was developed. Subsequently, the planning process stalled until 2020 when the County pulled the Plan off the shelf to be considered for approval. The significant changes in the County that have occurred during the intervening five years are ignored in the current process. The population has grown during this five-year period. These new residents join the 99% of previous residents who are disenfranchised by the County with regard to input. Perhaps the most glaring flaw in the process is the dusting off of the Plan for approval during a raging pandemic that shows no signs of abating. Many people are confined to their homes and dogged by uncertainties and dealing with a new way of life. Clearly, the focus of Rice County residents at this time is on the safety and future of their loved ones rather than the Plan.

A document intended to guide a large, populous county for the next twenty years should be written in a professional manner and have a foundation in data. The current draft Plan current plan includes a significant amount of the author's opinion, content without rationale, and inaccuracies. Citing merely

two examples, on page 9, the statement “It is evident an increase in commercial / industrial development is necessary in Rice County” is asserted without providing any supporting evidence. The next sentence states that the commercial / industrial tax base has increased to “roughly 18%” in 2017. Yet the accompanying figure (page 8) shows Commercial at 3.08% and Industrial at 19.07%, the sum of which is not roughly 18%, but rather 22.15%. It is noteworthy that Dakota County’s commercial / industrial percentage is 22%. These are just two of many conclusory statements and inaccuracies in the Plan.

The most obvious problem with the proposed Plan is the fact that the map does not reflect the narrative. The Plan includes multiple statements that concern the effort to locate appropriate industrial areas. Why would a map inexplicably show a commercial / industrial swath along Forest Townships’ interstate frontage when the narrative clearly states that a variety of factors should be employed to *determine where* to place industrial areas? FEDA requests that the County remove this industrial designation from the map and pursue a valid process to determine the siting of any industrial areas in the County. A reasonable approach would include engaging an environmental design and engineering firm to study what types of development would be feasible, economically viable, safe, and compatible with existing land use.

As you are aware, FEDA recognizes that development will and should come to Rice County. FEDA welcomes the “orderly growth and a diverse economy” that is a part of the Rice County vision. However, the process of determining how development happens should be solid. It should be informed by data from many sources.

Again, thank you for the work you have done toward the 2040 Comprehensive Plan. If FEDA can be of assistance in any way, please let us know. Thank you for your consideration.

Truly yours,

Forest Economic Development Association

FEDAInfo.org

Board@FEDAInfo.org