

# Ashland, Wisconsin

## A Coastal Community Smart Growth Case Study

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Ashland is a small community in northeastern Wisconsin, located on Chequamegon Bay on the southwest shore of Lake Superior. Endowed with an abundance of natural



resources (timber, water, iron ore and brownstone) and access to the Great Lakes, the city of Ashland flourished as a port in the 1800s where raw and processed natural materials were shipped to urban areas elsewhere in the Great Lakes region. At that time, Ashland's waterfront was developed to serve the industries that supported the processing and transport of natural resources, such as sawmills, lumberyards and iron docks. Supporting commercial development grew up south of the waterfront, while residential development occurred still south of the commercial area.

Railroads also played an important role in Ashland's growth from the late 1800s into the early 1900s. Six independent railroads transported large quantities of iron ore and lumber to Ashland for processing.

By 1900, the city's population peaked at 13,074 when the shipping, mining and timber industries were still thriving. However, the boom did not last long. Unsustainable management practices depleted the area's natural resources, causing a collapse in the local economy. Conifers that dominated the landscape were harvested by the disastrous practice of clear-cutting in the early 1900s. The high-grade iron ore in the region was fully exploited, and investments in mining declined. Within a decade, industries and railroads began to

close. The busy port and the shipping industry that served it went from moving millions of tons of iron ore, brownstone and lumber to an occasional shipment of coal. By 2009, the Canadian National Railway which

acquired Wisconsin Central was the only railroad service in Ashland.

As industries declined, so did the population. Ashland lost population at a rate of about 5 percent every decade from the early 1900s until the 1990s. From 1990 to 2000, Ashland's population began to stabilize with only a 0.8 percent decline. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Ashland's population is just over 8,600.

Like many post-war cities and towns across the Great Lakes region and elsewhere in the U.S., while the city itself contracted, the surrounding towns and rural areas of Ashland County, experienced a 3.4 percent population increase from 16,307 in 1990 to 16,866 in 2000.

And, like other coastal communities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the city of Ashland is transitioning from a resource extraction and manufacturing-based economy to a services and tourism based economy. City officials and many residents realize that smart growth holds promise for an improved environment and quality of life as they work through this transitional phase. The burgeoning eye toward smart growth as a guidepost for the city's future is most notable in Ashland's comprehensive and waterfront development plans.

### **Rugged Individualism Meets Sustainability**

The Director of Planning and Development for the city of Ashland, Ms. Brea Lemke, describes Ashland as a community of “hardy-natured residents, who love the natural environment of the region and endure tough winter conditions.” Because of Ashland’s remote location, its residents have had to rely on themselves and neighbors to get things done, resulting in their strong sense of place. The rugged individual mentality is typical of Ashland residents and underlies the public will that supports many smart growth activities that the community has embraced.



**Canoeing in Lake Superior**  
Source: City of Ashland

Having a strong sense of community, the public has influenced smart growth in the larger Chequamegon Bay region through a grassroots movement led by Alliance for Sustainability. This grassroots movement recognizes that economic development for the region, advanced by sustainable development principles, will create jobs. The Alliance promotes a sustainability model based on the Sustainable Sweden, Eco-municipality Movement. Ashland city councilor, Ms. Mary Rehwald, visited Sweden in the summer of 2004 to learn more about the Eco-municipality Movement. Information and experiences gained by this trip were shared with the region’s residents in a 2005 conference. Solidifying public desire for the region to be a national rural model of sustainable development was a major outcome of that conference.

The momentum begun by the conference is continuing through conversations within nine discussion groups called “Study Circles”. One of those has lobbied successfully to increase the Bay Area Rural Transit (BART) bus funding that will

improve the frequency and availability of stops in the region.

### **Comprehensive Planning: A State and Local Partnership**

The *City of Ashland Comprehensive Plan*, adopted in 2004, contains a number of smart growth elements as summarized in Table 1. The development of the plan was primarily driven by state legislation passed in 1999 (Act 9) that requires that all communities in Wisconsin develop comprehensive plans by 2010. Known commonly as Wisconsin’s Smart Growth legislation, the Act sets forth a framework for what those plans should include, outlines procedures for adopting the plans, and requires that certain actions be consistent with an adopted plan. The Act also creates a comprehensive planning grants program and stresses the importance of citizen involvement, community visioning, and other types of public participation in the planning and plan adoption processes.

To be sure, the state legislation provided an significant impetus for Ashland to develop its comprehensive plan, the final comprehensive plan adopted by the city of Ashland goes beyond what is required by the state by providing a coastal management section and neighborhood plans for a couple of areas within the city.

### **Waterfront Development Plan**

The *Ashland Waterfront Development Plan*, provides a long-range vision for the redevelopment of the Ashland waterfront with two primary goals in mind.

1. ...for the Ashland waterfront to become a major tourist destination on the south shore of Lake Superior..., and
2. ... to elevate the standard of living by providing recreational and cultural facilities, better access to Lake Superior and a broader employment and tax base.

The waterfront plan was developed in 1994 and updated 2002 with state and federal funding through the Wisconsin coastal management program. It promotes many of the smart growth elements such as protecting open space, a variety of transportation choices, preserving and

enhancing coastal heritage, and creating walkable waterfronts.

**Table 1: Coastal & Waterfront Smart Growth Element and Related Drivers in Ashland, Wisconsin**

	Smart Growth Implementation	Comp Plan	Waterfront Plan	Public Will	Local Initiative	Local Regulation	State Regs/Program	Federal Program
1. Mixed land uses	✓	X					X	
2. Compact building design	✓	X					X	
3. Range of housing opportunities	✓	X			X		X	
4. Walkable waterfronts & public access	✓	X	X	X		X	X	X
5. Distinctive, disaster-resilient communities	✓	X	X				X	
6. Preserve open space	✓	X	X	X			X	
7. Directed development & revitalization	✓	X	X	X		X	X	X
8. Variety of transportation choices	✓	X	X	X			X	
9. Consistent polices & coordinated permitting								
10. Stakeholder collaboration in decisions	✓	X	X				X	

### SMART GROWTH ELEMENTS

With comprehensive and waterfront plans in place, the city of Ashland is beginning to leverage its natural assets to transform its waterfront and downtown. Various elements of smart growth are beginning to emerge.

#### Waterfront Revitalization and Public Access

Remnants of Ashland’s industrial legacy still line the waterfront, as evidenced by the ore dock and pilings of other docks that lie submerged in the bay and the contaminants still detected in parts of the waterfront. Despite this legacy of contaminated waterfront areas, Ashland residents value access to Lake Superior and the revitalization of Ashland’s waterfront. According to a community survey that was conducted for the development of the city’s comprehensive plan, more than 74 percent of respondents identified public access to and views of Lake Superior as an important component of their quality of life in Ashland. More than half of the respondents indicated that they would like the city promote more links to Lake Superior.

The Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center is an example of a project that brings people to the

water as well as increases community understanding of region’s cultural and natural history. The development of the center was initiated by local citizens with state and federal funds.



Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center  
Source: Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center



Opened in 1998, the center features history exhibits, art gallery, theater, a three quarter mile boardwalk and interpretive trail, and a 5-story observation tower offering panoramic view of Lake Superior and the Apostle Islands Region.

Both the comprehensive plan and the waterfront development plan promote pedestrian friendly waterfronts and public access as elements to advance waterfront revitalization. The waterfront development plan sets forth a specific course for transforming four former industrial sites into a 21<sup>st</sup> century waterfront that recognizes the area's past, but allows for greater public access and enjoyment.

First, a former coal dock, will be turned into a community festival grounds and Great Lakes cruise ship terminal. The second industrial site, the former wastewater treatment plant will be transformed into an expanded marina and lakefront park. The existing treatment plant buildings will be reused to house marine support facilities and a community visitor cent.



**Soo Line Ore Dock**

The third site, the Soo Line Ore Dock, is a monolithic concrete and steel structure along the

waterfront. The construction of a Great Lakes Shipping and Mining Interpretive Center on this site will create a tourist destination with a regional draw that celebrates Ashland's industrial past and Lake Superior's national role. A site assessment has been completed, and the city is reviewing three design concepts drafted by various developers.

Last, the Clarkson Dock is an unutilized waterfront property once served as a storage and transfer facility and has been vacant for nearly 60 years. This site will be redeveloped into a RV camping area to maximize public access to the waterfront.

The comprehensive plan shares many of the goals of the waterfront development plan recommendations, but is broader in scope to include coastal issues relevant to the entire waterfront, not just the four targeted areas. In doing so, the following activities were identified as priorities for improving the access to the city's waterfront. Along coastal Highway 2 and other connecting city streets, safe pedestrian crossings, green corridors and streetscapes will be constructed. This city will explore ways to expand the waterfront trail and connect it to the Northern Great Lakes Visitors Center. Additionally, a plan to protect and connect significant natural areas and open spaces in the city will be developed.

The city is working hard to move these projects from design to reality. A major accomplishment which the city has made on its waterfront is the establishment of a recreational trail system that loops along the lakeshore. This trail system includes amenities such as decorative lighting, benches, garbage receptacles and mutt mitts. The trail system is a very popular recreational corridor for Ashland residents whether they are biking, cross-county skiing or walking to work. Construction of another trail connection, with a public plaza, is planned for summer 2009 that will allow for a safe crossing of Highway 2 (via an underpass). This segment will also create a unique connection between Ashland's historic downtown and the Lake Superior waterfront.

Additionally, several bioretention ponds have been recently created on the north side of Highway 2 to allow for treatment and detention of

stormwater prior to release into Lake Superior. Private redevelopment of Ashland's waterfront is also increasing in recent years with hotel, restaurant, retail/office, and residential developments that have a lakefront orientation.

A Waterfront Development Committee is in place to oversee the public improvements and expenditures to the waterfront and to encourage community participation. The city of Ashland invests approximately \$75,000 annually from the city's portion of the room tax into a waterfront development fund that is strictly used for waterfront development projects. Aside from overseeing waterfront improvements, the Waterfront Development Committee, in partnership with the Ashland Chamber of Commerce, hosts an annual public beach cleaning event to prepare for upcoming summer recreation.



Ashland City Hall  
Source: City of Ashland

### **Fostering distinctive communities while preserving coastal heritage**

Ashland's distinctive character was developed in part by its isolated geography (6 hour driving distance from the state capital) and its role as port and regional hub of economic activity.

This character appears in its architecture. The historically-significant brownstone buildings, the former docks and the railroad that runs along the waterfront all mark Ashland's distinctive history as a bustling port. Some of the brownstone buildings have been preserved and the city has managed to retain retailers that use these spaces to provide a unique shopping experience for residents and visitors. Another landmark of Ashland's distinctive waterfront character is the Chequamegon Hotel. Overlooking the bay, it was built in mid-1980s to commemorate the former Chequamegon Resort.

The city continues to work with its Historic Preservation Commission to identify, preserve and protect resources and structures that contribute to Ashland's architectural and cultural heritage.

### **Open Space Protection**

Fifty five percent (4,950 acres) of Ashland's land is open space. Ashland residents value the protection of these open spaces. According to a community survey that was part of the comprehensive planning development process, a vast majority of Ashland residents value natural areas as an important part of their quality of life and want the city to promote the protection of these natural areas. The large majority consider Ashland's parks and open space as either very good or excellent.

As an important element of open space, wetlands are given additional protection. Based on minimum state standards, the current city shoreland-wetland ordinance provides protection of existing wetlands over five acres in area that are within 1,000 feet of the lake. Given the important role that wetlands play in the protection and enhancement of coastal resources, the city is considering updating the wetland ordinance and developing a shoreland overlay ordinance to address viewsheds, setbacks from the lake and impervious coverage.

## **Mixed Land Uses and Compact Building Design**

Mixed land uses are an important element in Ashland's comprehensive plan and is reflective of current land use patterns. The comprehensive plan notes that future development will involve a mixture of residential types and densities as well as a mixture of residential and commercial uses. The city's zoning ordinance is scheduled to be rewritten in 2009 to be more reflective of (through specific mixed-use zoning districts) current land use patterns and the goals of the comprehensive plan. Drafts of the zoning ordinances are available on the city's website.

In terms of compact building design, the comprehensive plan describes the future vision for housing as a mixture of low, moderate and high-density housing. The city of Ashland was platted with 25' x 140' lots in the central part of the community. Such lot sizes have encouraged property owners to rehabilitate or construct compact homes that are appropriate to the smaller-than-national-average lot sizes.

### **Range of Housing Opportunities**

The comprehensive plan recognizes the need to provide a range of housing opportunities to accommodate residents from all demographic groups (e.g., students, first time homeowners, move up buyers, empty nesters and seniors). In 2005, the city established a Housing Committee to address these issues.

### **Variety of Transportation Choices**

The city of Ashland is a key contributor to the operations of the regional mass transit system (Bay Area Rural Transit - BART) which provides affordable in-city and regional transportation. In mid-2006, BART implemented a service revision that made buses run consistently every 2 hours and filled in service gaps. This made the service much easier to use from the perspective of the customer; the more convenient for the customer, the more they will use the service.

To make the city more pedestrian friendly, millions of dollars in the last three years have been spent for significant improvements to the pedestrian sidewalk and trail network. These investments by the municipality, federal grant funds and property owners (through special

assessments) have provided the financing necessary to provide a transportation network for recreation, commuting, and public health improvements. Additionally, the city invested in (during roadway reconstructions) and has required infrastructure to support bicyclists (i.e., bike racks, bike lanes) through its site plan review process.

## **BENEFITS**

The comprehensive and waterfront development plans have been placed since 2004, and several projects, some of which are described above, are already being implemented. Although the results of the smart growth planning are too new to evaluate systematically or use to draw any methodical conclusions, some observable benefits are discussed below.

### **Public Access**

Public access includes parks and trails which occupy approximately 450 acres or 5 percent of land area of the community.

### **Economic Activity**

The Northern Great Lakes Center has drawn over 800,000 visitors from 2003 to 2008 to Ashland. The Ashland Chamber of Commerce speculates that these visitors have also contributed to the local economy through restaurants and other tourist activities.

Between 1994 and 2007, economic activity in the county of Ashland has almost doubled from \$22,313,805 to \$65,345,400.

### **Transportation**

BART ridership during 2008 increased 31 percent from 2007. The overall, ridership more than doubled from 16,285 in 2004 to 39,872 in 2009. Improvements in the service were the single biggest factor in the increase in ridership.

Additional benefits of these projects and planning activities will most likely appear in subsequent years. Trend analyses based on environmental and socio-economic indicators will need to be conducted to measure the benefits of projects with an eye on comparing outcomes based on smart growth principles. Future analyses of this kind will also need to consider the context of the global economic crisis which began in late 2007.

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