

# Urban Service Areas

## What Are Urban Service Areas?

In order to avoid wasteful use of land and to most efficiently provide public services and facilities, the Dane County Regional Planning Commission (RPC) introduced the concept of urban service areas in the first Dane County Land Use Plan in 1973. Urban service areas are those areas in and around existing communities which are most suitable for urban development and capable of being provided with a full range of urban services. (Urban services are those additional public services normally provided or needed in urban areas, including public water supply and distribution systems, sanitary sewerage systems, higher levels of police and fire protection, solid waste collection, urban storm drainage systems, streets with curbs and gutters, street lighting, neighborhood facilities such as parks and schools, and urban transportation facilities such as sidewalks, taxi service and mass transit.)

The urban service area boundaries represent the outer limits of planned urban growth over the long-term planning period--at least 20 years--and include more than enough land to accommodate anticipated growth. Short-term staging boundaries are sometimes developed to indicate where urban development should occur and services be extended over the near-term future (up to 10 years), to assist in logical staging of growth and extension of services.

Regional plans also provide for Limited Service Areas--areas where only one or a few limited urban services, such as sanitary sewer service, is intended to be provided to special or unique areas (remote correctional facilities, sanitary landfills, etc.) or areas of existing development experiencing sewage disposal problems. These areas are not intended to receive a full range of urban services or additional urban development.

## How Are Urban Service Areas Developed?

The RPC works with the local community to develop an urban service area boundary which can be included in both local and regional plans. Twenty-five urban service areas and a number of limited service areas have been designated and adopted in Dane County. The approach involves:

- determining the amount of vacant land needed for urban development, consistent with population and growth forecasts and density standards. This information provides the basis for outlining an urban service area which contains enough vacant land to flexibly accommodate anticipated urban growth, yet is compact enough to result in orderly, staged development.
- locating potential urban service area boundaries, such as natural or constructed barriers to development, drainage area boundaries or other logical service boundaries
- protecting areas unsuitable for development, such as wetlands, floodplains, steep slopes, etc.
- Short-term staging boundaries are encouraged to indicate where urban development should occur and services be extended over the near-term future (5-10 years), to assist in logical staging of growth and extension of services. Short-term staging boundaries are required for large (over 100 acres of developable land) expansions of urban service areas.
- A “flexibility margin” of up to 100% of the incremental growth area is allowed to provide greater flexibility for the smaller outer urban service areas.

## How Are Urban Service Areas Used?

Local municipalities and the RPC use urban service areas to plan the location of urban developments showing where urban services will be provided.

RPC and DNR approve sewer extensions and sewage treatment facilities based on USA boundaries.

USAs are included in areawide plans so that local, regional and state agency decisions can be consistent and achieve desired growth and development patterns.

## How Are Urban Service Areas Changed?

Urban service areas are changed in response to:

- (a) changes in population or land use forecasts
- (b) evidence of actual growth and development occurring much faster than forecast
- (c) adjustments or changes in the specific location or direction of growth and development
- (d) changes resulting from a community plan update or revision.

The process of change involves these steps:

- (1) the request for the proposed change must be sponsored by or initiated by the local governmental unit or the RPC (changes requested by individuals or private parties must be channeled through the local unit of government). The request must be accompanied by a plan or description of: (a) the specific land use or proposed development for the area; (b) any environmental corridor or other areas intended to be protected or excluded from development; and (c) a plan and statement of intent to provide the needed urban services to the area. The specific information which must be submitted is described in the Planning Submittal Requirement for Urban Service Area Amendments, available from the RPC.
- (2) the RPC staff consults with affected governmental units to obtain information related to the need and impacts of the proposed change, and to identify any unresolved issues or controversies
- (3) the RPC staff prepares an analysis of the proposed change
- (4) the Regional Planning Commission holds a public hearing on the proposed change
- (5) the Dane County Regional Planning Commission acts on the proposed change
- (6) the RPC action is forwarded to any other agency which needs to approve of changes for specific purposes (the County Board for Farmland Preservation Plan changes, DNR for Water Quality Plan changes, etc.)

In general, the proposed changes must be consistent with the process and criteria for delineation of urban service area boundaries:

- the change must be consistent with adopted forecasts and density standards and not exceed the maximum size allowed by these standards (a “trade” may be made to accommodate USA additions which would otherwise exceed the maximum size, by removing an equivalent amount of vacant developable land from the urban service area to compensate for the addition). Short-term staging boundaries are required for large urban service area changes.
- areas unsuitable for development (environmental corridors) must be identified and excluded from development (see the Environmental Corridors Fact Sheet, available from the RPC, for more information)
- the change should generally be consistent and supportive of adopted plan policies and objectives. Any important adverse impacts of the proposed change should be addressed and mitigated to the extent possible.

*For more specific questions or information, contact the CAPD office.*



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