

Rural Living Guide

Polk County, Wisconsin

July 2008

Introduction

The rural areas of Polk County continue to experience rapid growth as many people choose to live in a country setting while being close to the urban amenities of the Twin Cities. The County welcomes new rural residents. Over half the population of Polk County lives in the country. Living in a rural area, however, differs in many ways from an urban community. This Rural Living Guide has been developed to inform those who are considering purchasing a rural property and those that already have. It is hoped that this information will help people consider issues that may affect them when living in a rural area.

Emergency Services

Law Enforcement

- The Polk County Sheriff's Department is responsible for law enforcement in areas outside of the cities and villages within the County.
- Response times tend to be longer than in urban areas and are affected by travel times, visibility of address signs, inclement weather, and road conditions. Police officers from nearby cities and villages may assist in certain situations.



Fire Protection

- The County is served by several local volunteer fire departments.
- The level of protection and response time depends on the access to water, distance of a structure from a fire station, type and number of vehicles, and number of volunteers and training. These factors affect home insurance rates.



Ambulance Service

- There are several public ambulance service areas in the County. Staffing is varied at each base to serve the needs of that area.
- Service may be affected by distance, weather conditions, and condition of public and private roads.



Rural Addresses

- In order for responders to quickly identify the location of an emergency, Polk County utilizes a standardized system for road names and address numbers.
- Address signs should be kept clear of obstruction and are to be parallel to the road for visibility in both directions.
- Addresses are assigned by the Land Information Department at (715) 485-9279.

911

- In case of emergency dial 911. Polk County has Enhanced 911 (E911), which displays your address and fire/ambulance district to the dispatch operator.



Building & Development

Permits

- Permits for construction, filling & grading, septic systems & other land use activities may be required by County, Town and State in order to assure compliance with ordinances.
- Waterfront and near waterfront properties have additional regulations and responsibilities to ensure resources are protected. Contact the Land Information Department at (715) 485-9279 and your Town Building Inspector or Clerk prior to any construction or changing or adding to a use on a piece of property.



Zoning and Subdivision

- Zoning regulations determine land uses, lot sizes, as well as setbacks from roads, property lines, and other features such as bluff lines along the St. Croix River. Subdivision regulations determine how land may be divided into smaller lots and new roads.
- Zoning and subdivision regulations promote orderly development, minimize conflicts between incompatible land uses and protect property values and resources.
- Seventeen towns in the County have adopted the County Zoning Ordinance. County Shoreland and Floodplain Zoning and the Sanitary Ordinance apply to all towns within Polk County. Contact the Land Information Department at (715) 485-9279 or see the county ordinance and interactive GIS mapping site: <http://www.polkcoqjws.com/>

Wells and Drinking Water

- Drinking water for rural houses comes from private wells. State regulations only require that the water be tested for bacteria at the time of construction. Thereafter it is the responsibility of landowners to test their water periodically.
- Water testing kits are available at the Polk County Health Department (715) 485-8500 in Balsam Lake; or through private labs. A fee may apply.
- The most common contaminant in Polk County wells is nitrate, which comes from animal waste, soil fertilizer, or failing septic systems. Contact the Polk County Land and Water Resource Department at (715) 485-8699 or Wisconsin DNR at (715) 822-3590.

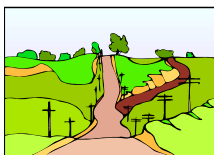


Septic Systems

- Private onsite wastewater treatment systems (POWTS) are used to treat wastewater from rural houses. Septic systems are the most common type of POWTS. Maintenance and care of these systems are the responsibility of the landowner.
- All POWTS are required to be inspected every three years, and most will need to be pumped at that time.
- Improper maintenance of your septic system could lead to premature failure of the system, expensive repairs, and contamination of your well water.
- For more information see "Care and Maintenance of Septic Systems," University of Wisconsin—Extension publication B3583. Or contact the Polk County Land Information Department at (715) 485-9170.

Roads and Driveway Access

- Most rural roads are under public ownership. Maintenance of public roads is the responsibility of the Town, County or State. It is the responsibility of the owners along a private road/joint driveway to maintain and plow snow.
- A driveway permit is required for access to public roads and highways. Standards for driveway locations vary depending on jurisdiction. For town roads contact your Town Board; for county roads, contact the Polk County Highway Department at (715) 485-8700; for state highways contact WisDOT at (800) 991-5285.
- Adequate space for emergency vehicle access is critical to your safety. Every driveway should have 12 feet of horizontal clearance and 13.5 feet of vertical clearance.



Private Property Restrictions

- There are private arrangements in addition to government regulations that may affect what you may do with your property.
- Easements may require you to allow construction and maintenance of roads, utilities, storm water facilities, etc. across your land.
- Many rural housing developments have home owners associations with deed restrictions and covenants that restrict outbuildings, outdoor storage, and building design.
- These restrictions may be recorded with the property deed, or with the plat. Check these issues carefully. Contact the County Register of Deeds at (715) 485-9240.

Government Services

Town Government



- All unincorporated areas are governed under "town" government. In many other states, including Minnesota, this unit of government is called a "township." "Towns" are not the same as small cities or villages, although they may have the same name.
- Services offered by town government vary. Town governments are rural in nature and do not provide a full range of services. Historically, a town government's primary responsibilities have been road maintenance and snow plowing. Some more populated towns have, however, added more services for their residents.
- Town government in Wisconsin has an element of direct participatory democracy through the Annual Meeting each April at which residents vote on policy and budget issues.
- Information on individual town governments is available at: <http://lqc.uwex.edu/publications/publs.html>

Snow Plowing

- Snow plowing takes longer to complete in a rural area. Your road may not be plowed before you have to leave in the morning. Major roads such as state highways and county roads get first priority.
- If you live on a private road or joint driveway, snow plowing is your responsibility. Talk to your neighbor before it snows.

Garbage and Recycling

- Garbage collection and recycling program details vary from town to town. Contact your Town Clerk.
- Special collections for hazardous waste are held periodically each year. However, appliances, electronics, and tires are collected at the recycling center during business hours.
- For more information call the County Recycling Specialist at (715) 485-9294.



Schools

- There are eleven public school districts in Polk County.
- The boundaries of the districts are extremely irregular. School district maps may be found at: <http://www.co.polk.wi.us/landinfo/maps.asp>
- Each district has its own policies regarding bus service.

Animals & Wildlife

Horses, Pets and Stray Animals

- Horses and other livestock must comply with prohibitions regarding runoff to lakes and rivers. Contact the Land and Water Resource Department at (715) 485-8699 for more information.
- Just like in cities, dogs need to be licensed and have their rabies vaccinations. Animals must be under control at all times.
- For information about dog licensing and control of stray animals contact your Town Clerk.

Driving

- Enjoy “grilled venison?” You may get some if you don't pay extra attention when driving. Each year thousands of deer are killed and injured by motor vehicles. Extra caution is needed when driving, especially at night. Seasonally, deer activity increases from early October through November. Most car/deer collisions occur in June, second most in November. During the mating season bucks chase does through all hours of the day and night.



Living with Wildlife

- Living in a rural area requires a lot of consideration of wildlife. Deer, although beautiful, can ravage a garden or expensive plants. Carefully consider which plants you will use in your landscaping or garden.
- Mosquitoes, deer flies and other biting insects are common and no control programs exist in rural areas.
- Bears and other wildlife are attracted to garbage and bird feeders as a food supply. Secure your garbage to prevent problems.
- Wood and deer ticks are parasites that suck blood from people and animals. The deer tick spreads Lyme Disease. Symptoms can vary in degree and may include a bulls eye bite and fatigue. It is usually treated with antibiotics but also can linger. Awareness is key and tick checks should be done daily on people and pets.
- To attract wildlife and improve habitat contact Wisconsin DNR at (715) 822-3590.



Agriculture

Farm Operation

- Agriculture is an important part of the Polk County economy. Farm operations have both legal rights and regulations.
- Farmers often work around the clock, and farm operations commonly include dust, noise, odors, and farm chemicals. These typical farm activities may affect adjoining property owners. If you suspect problems due to pesticide misuse, you may file a verbal complaint to the Department of Agriculture at (608) 224-4500



- State of WI requires Livestock Premises Registration for any livestock, even poultry raised for a few months



Manure

- Manure is an inevitable and valuable by-product of livestock production. Unfortunately the odor does not smell like ‘roses’ to some people.
- Most farmers have a nutrient management plan for their farm which is based on soil tests and the crops grown in order to grow crops efficiently and minimize run off.
- Polk County has a Manure and Water Quality Management ordinance which spells out procedures to deal with problems arising from poor manure management. Contact Polk County Land and Water Resources at (715) 485-8699.



Fences

- State law (Chapter 90 of State Statutes) states that if livestock is present on one property, a fence must be maintained on the property line by BOTH property owners. Other accommodations can be made if both parties agree. See the Country Acres publication from University of Wisconsin Extension for more information.

Slow Moving Vehicles

- Farm vehicles are allowed on all roads and may back up traffic. Please watch for, and be patient with, slow moving vehicles. Most drivers of slow moving vehicles will wave you through when it is safe to pass.



Fire Danger

Housing in Wooded Areas

- Living in the woods is very rewarding. However, those trees are also threats to your home. When building or purchasing an existing home, maintain a buffer between your home and the forest to reduce the fire danger to your home. Contact the DNR office at (715) 822-3590 or visit www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/land/forestry/fire/index.htm.

Outdoor Burning

- Wildfires happen most often during the months of April and May. A primary cause of these fires is debris burning.
- Permits are needed for all outdoor debris burning whenever the ground is not snow covered. Burning permits may be obtained from the Town; ask about informing emergency dispatch. No permit is needed when the sole purpose is for cooking and warming.



Burn Barrels

- The DNR strongly discourages the use of burn barrels.
- The only items that may be burned are leaves, plant clippings, paper, cardboard, and clean untreated wood.
- Burning materials such as tires, plastic, and rubber is prohibited because they generate toxic air emissions and hazardous ash residue. For more information see: www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/aw/air/hot/barrels.htm.



Recreation

Hunting, Fishing and Trapping

- Hunting, fishing and trapping are rural traditions. There is a season for many species, some of which are open the entire year. Most hunting however is done in the fall. Wisconsin has hunter harassment laws that make it a crime to interfere with legal hunting. Respect those who partake in these activities or join a local sportsman club to learn how to participate yourself.



Trespass

- You are criminally trespassing on private land unless you get permission from the owner. Land does not have to be posted with signs unless it is adjacent to public land (includes private forest lands open to public hunting/use). Respect private property and ask before you use.

ATV, Snowmobile and Trail Use

- Within Polk County ATV use is allowed on your private property.
- The Cattail, Sterling and Clear Lake-Clayton trails are designated public ATV trails within the County. Please be considerate and respect your neighbors.
- Polk County has a system of public snowmobile and hiking trails. Maps for these trails can be found at: <http://www.polkcountytourism.com/maps.html> For more information contact the County Parks and Buildings Department at (715) 485-9294.



Additional Resources

For more information on Rural Living, contact the Polk County Information Center at (715) 483-1410 or the County UW-Extension Office, see the following University of Wisconsin-Extension Publications, or visit www.uwex.edu/ces.

- Country Acres: A Guide to Buying and Managing Rural Property (G3309)
- Care & Maintenance of Resid. Septic Systems (B3583)
- Outdoor Hazards in Wisconsin: A Guide to Noxious Insects, Plants, and Wildlife (G3564)
- Plants Not Favored by Deer (A3727)
- Landscape Plants That Attract Birds (G1609)
- Prairie Primer (G3736)
- Wildlife Management (G3097)

This information is by no means all inclusive. There may be issues that you may encounter that we have overlooked. Look for the unexpected and surprises when purchasing rural property.



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