

III. Regional Vision and Opportunities

Understanding of the Study Area's place in the larger region was critical to the development of the *Highway 12 Corridor Growth Management Plan*. Based in early public input, a Regional Opportunities Analysis was undertaken to formulate initial ideas and identify "big picture" opportunities for the entire Study Area. The Regional Opportunities Analysis began by looking at the historic geology, the Study Area's role within the Midwest and south central Wisconsin, influences that might affect its future and the character of the landscape. The results of the Analysis are presented in this chapter.

A. Regional Context

1. Historic Geology and Ecology

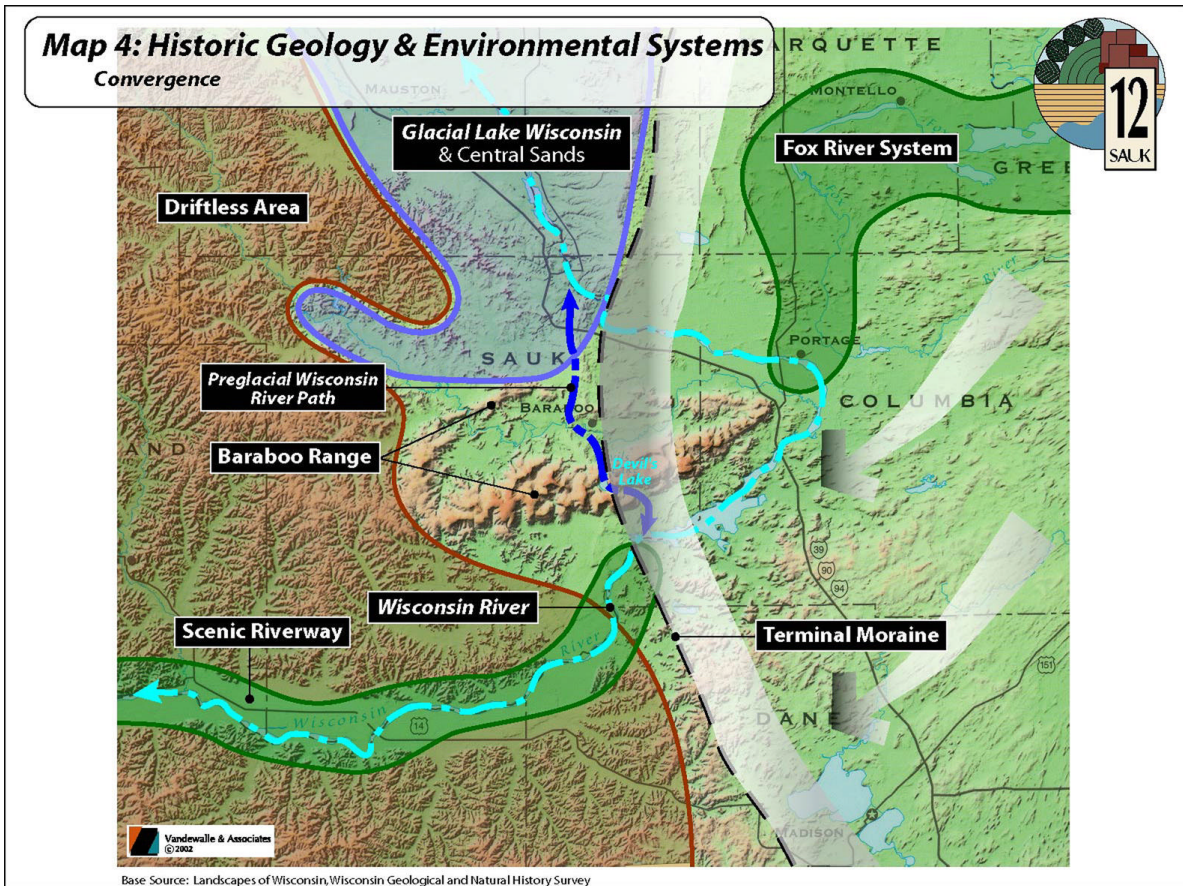
The 24-mile Sauk County stretch of Highway 12 traverses one of the most dramatic and diverse natural landscapes of the region. It is here where an ancient ridge, a regional river valley, the unique Driftless Area, and the landscapes created by the retreat of the last glacier converge (see Map 4).

Of the few places in Wisconsin deserving of the title "range," the Baraboo Range is one of most dramatic features in the state. Considered by geologists as a monadnock and an outlier of a regional escarpment, the Range is about 25 miles in length and averages 5 to 10 miles in width. It is a dramatic folding of a complex mass of varying rock types trending east and west which rises to 1620 feet above sea level, looming above surrounding prairies, woodlands, and farmland. For travelers on Highway 12, it creates a unique forested backdrop and the rare experience of a significant elevation change in Wisconsin.

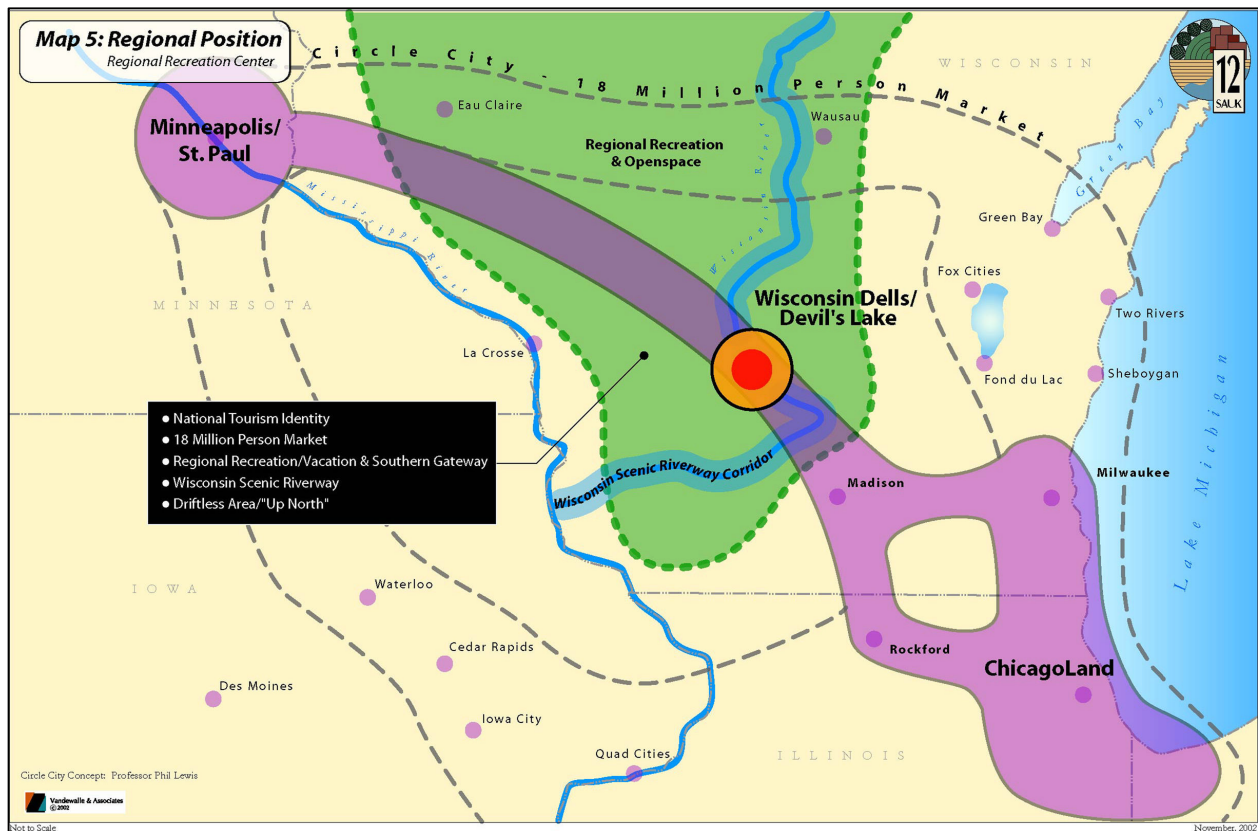
The most dramatic bend and change of direction in the course of Wisconsin River also occurs here. For most of its journey to the Mississippi, the Wisconsin River flows south, from the northern highland through the central plain. As it reaches Sauk County, however, the River must find its way around the Baraboo Range, before it flows westerly to find its way through the Driftless Area to the Mississippi River. Before the recent arrival of the glaciers dammed its passageway, the mighty river passed through a gap in the Baraboo Range in the current location of Devil's Lake.

The diversity of the landscape along the route of Highway 12 is also the result of its location on the leading edge of the glacier. The path of today's Highway 12 more or less parallels this line where, ten thousand years ago, the glacier fought to push further, but ended its march and then retreated. Today's Highway 12 traverses rolling farmland, linear hills, flat valleys, stone-strewn fields, and sandy soils—all the diverse impacts of the retreated glacier. Not far to the west, still within the Study Area, lies the Driftless Area and its distinct ridges and valleys of ancient eroded bedrock untouched by the last glacier.

As a result of its geological history (and its latitude), the Highway 12 Study Area is located within a distinct ecoregion referred to as the Prairie Forest Border. This is a transition zone between the northern forests and the tall grass prairies. Oak Savannah and barrens best express the landscape features within the Prairie Forest Border ecoregion. Barrens are plant communities that occur on sandy soils and are dominated by grasses, low shrubs, small trees, and scattered large trees. Pine barrens are the dominant community between the North Baraboo Range and the Dells. The South Baraboo Range is classified as a Southern Upland Forest, which is an ecological island within the Prairie Forest Border ecoregion. Remnants of the historic areas of prairie, located primarily south of the South Baraboo Range and near the Wisconsin River, still remain.



November, 2002



November, 2002

2. Regional Position

Sauk County is located at the heart of a “Circle City” (see Map 5). This Circle City is one of 23 urban constellations in the United States identified by Professor Emeritus Philip Lewis of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. These constellations include 85% of the country’s population and suggest the criteria for guiding urban growth in such a way as to preserve critical landscapes, regional foodsheds, and transportation systems.

The particular Circle City that surrounds the Study Area is an urban constellation that incorporates portions of five states and three of the Midwest’s major urban centers—Chicago, Minneapolis/Saint Paul, and Milwaukee. Over 18 million people reside in this Circle City, within a four-hour drive from the Study Area. The natural resources located at the center of this Circle City—scenic rivers, ancient mountain ranges, unique topography, and rich agriculture—make up the regional recreation and open space system that serves those 18 million residents, particularly the residents of the Chicagoland metro area.

The Wisconsin Dells/Devil’s Lake area has been a tourist destination since the late 1800s. It has long been seen as a regional destination for vacationers as well as the southern gateway to the natural and recreational assets “up north.” First railroads and then highways provided easy access to the area for the residents of this Circle City, creating a national identity for the region as a tourist destination.

B. Visual Character and Landscape Personality Analysis

Every landscape in the world, from the monotonous to the dramatic, has “personality.” A landscape personality is the combination of every trait of a landscape’s character. Shaped by both natural and cultural forces, a landscape’s personality has developed through millions of years of natural transformation and hundreds of years of human manipulation.

Existing personalities in the Study Area’s landscape provided the foundation for this *Plan’s* recommendations and the baseline against which all future proposals to alter the landscape should be evaluated. These personality characteristics contain valuable resources, information, and lessons for present and future inhabitants. The personalities hold what inhabitants and visitors value – a character, a feeling, a connection between the land and its people. These personalities reflect natural and human history and tell of the interaction between the natural setting and the humans who settled the land.

The following sections describe the landscape personalities of the Highway 12 corridor in Sauk County. The personalities were carefully considered during the development of the alternative future scenarios and the recommendations for the associated planning districts presented later in this *Plan*.

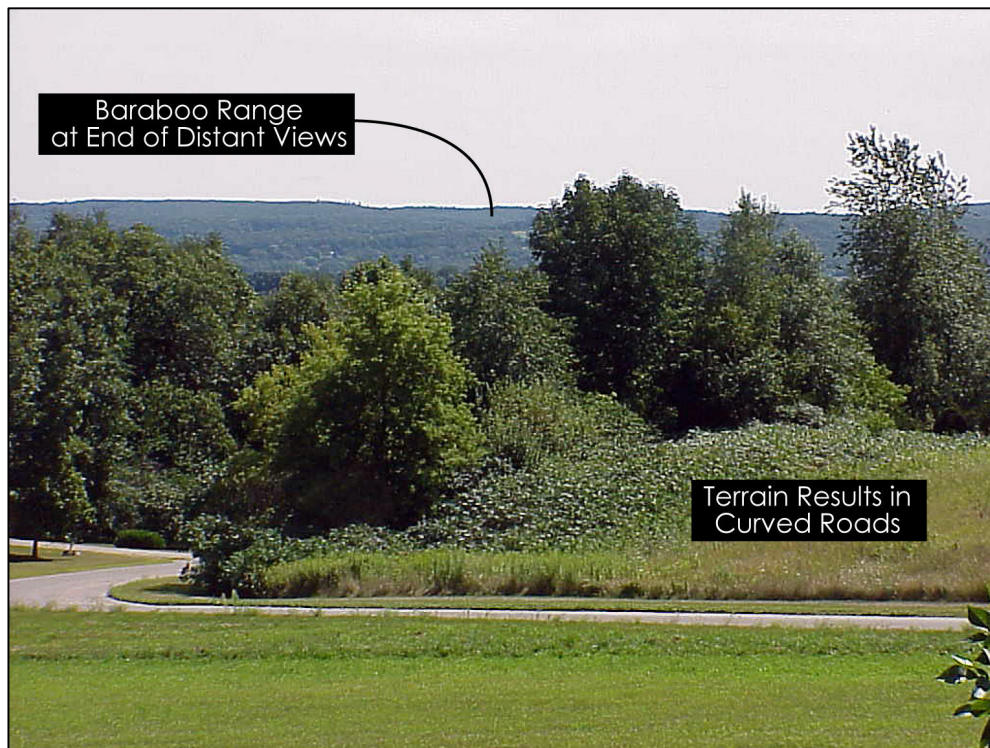
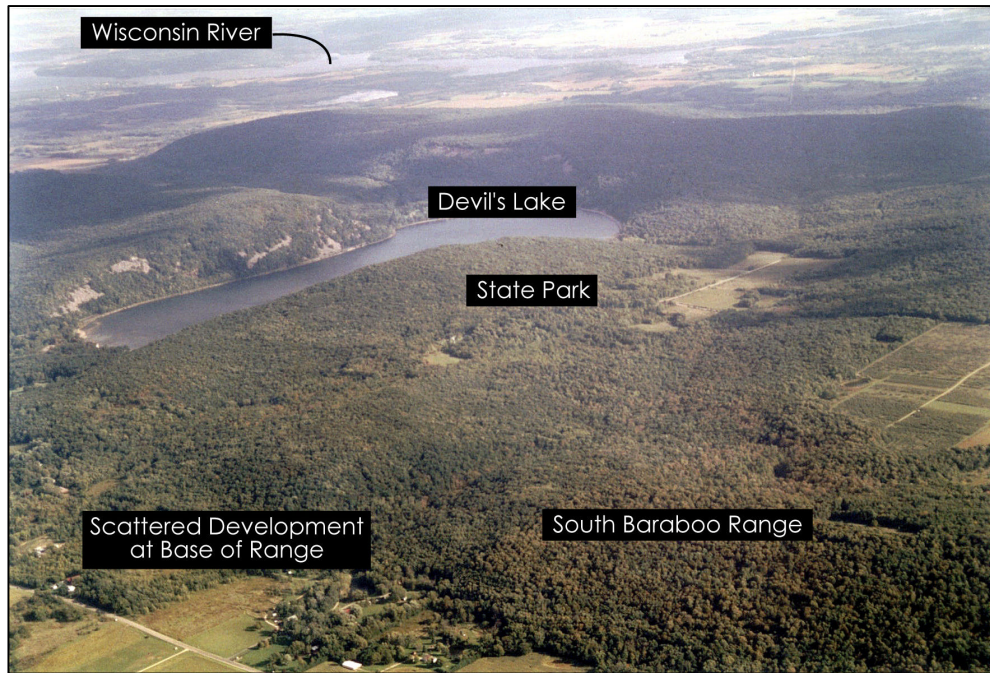
Map 6: Landscape Personalities – Natural & Agricultural Landscape Traits



1. Landscape Personality—Natural and Agricultural Landscape Traits

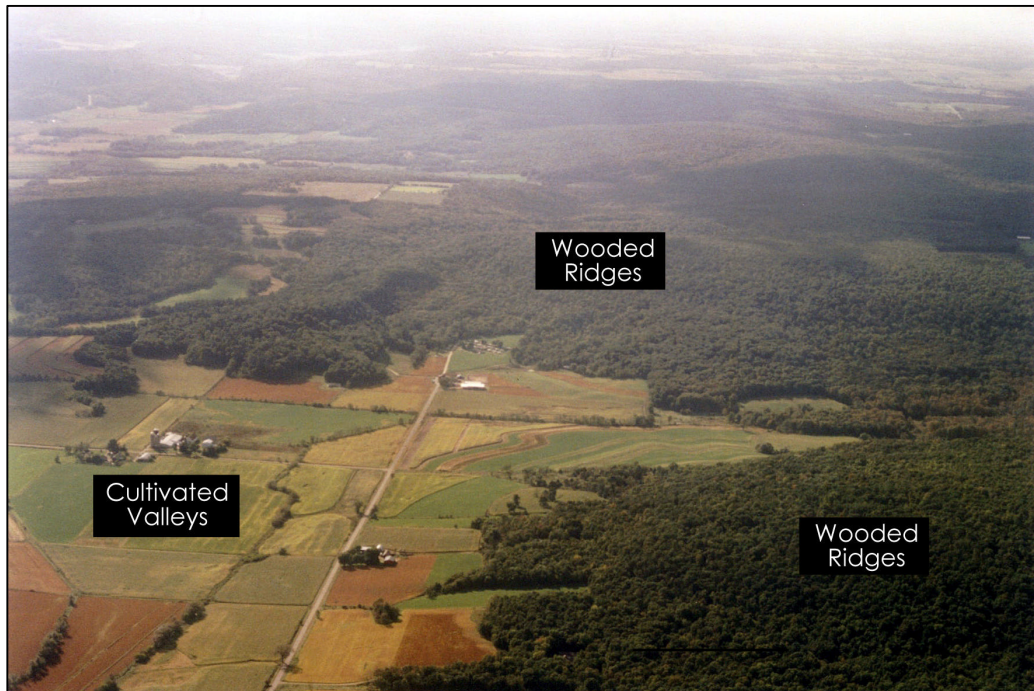
a) Baraboo Range

The Baraboo Range is the most dramatic natural feature in Sauk County and can be seen from nearby Columbia and Dane Counties. The South Range and North Range form an oval with an east-west orientation. Dramatic Baraboo quartzite outcroppings, gorges, glens, gaps and hollows characterize the South Range. Natural Bridge and Devil’s Lake State Parks encompass many of these natural features.



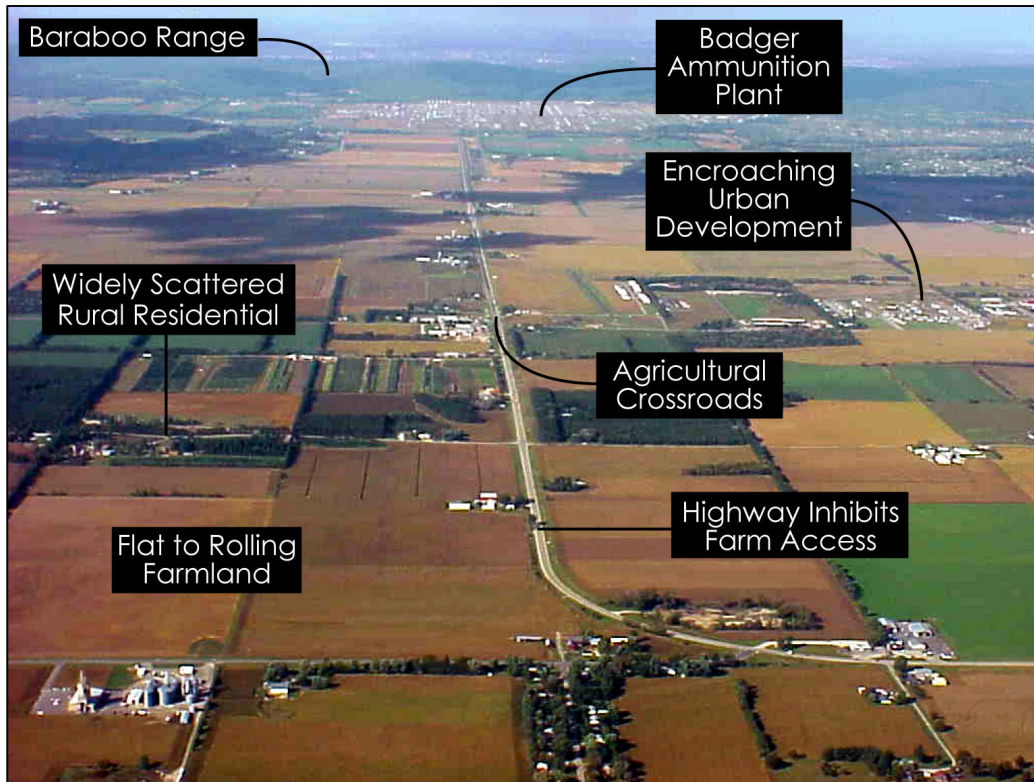
b) Driftless Area

Cultivated valleys surrounded by numerous wooded ridges form the landscape pattern of the Driftless Area. Due to lack of glaciation, the landscape has dramatic elevation changes and rock outcroppings. This area varies greatly from the surrounding glaciated landscapes. Distant views from the valleys are limited by the surrounding wooded hillsides. The most famous and dramatic feature of the Driftless Area is the Wisconsin Dells area. Located in northern Sauk County, this area contains dramatic sandstone formations, the upper and lower dells, Lake Delton, and Mirror Lake. These natural features are the foundation of the area's tourism industry



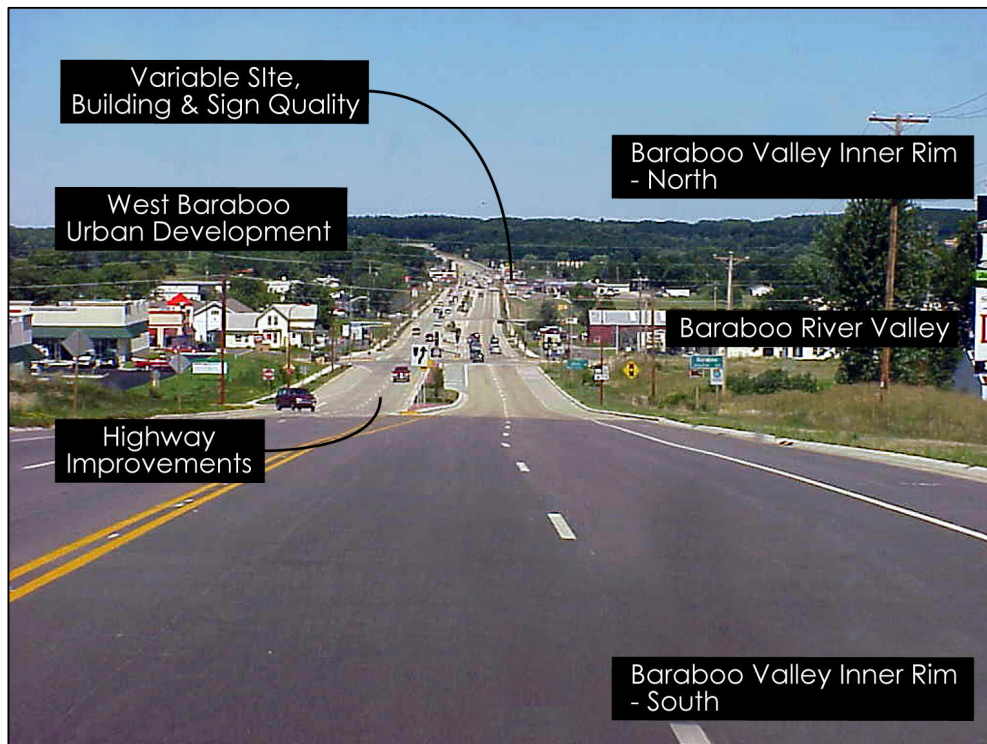
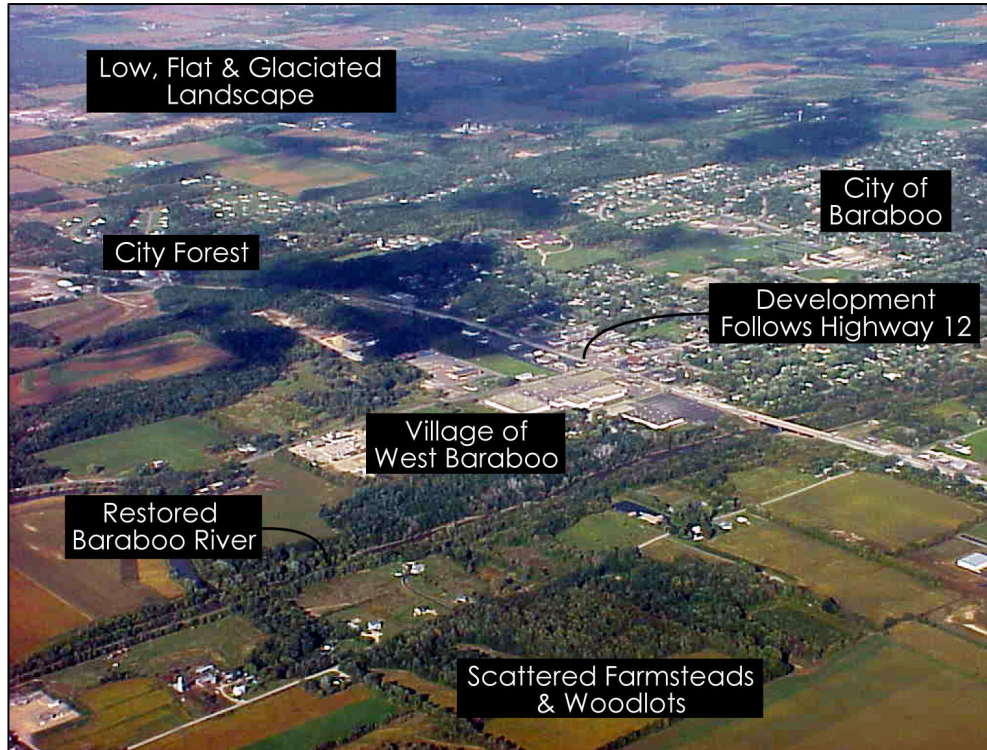
c) Outwash Prairie

A flat to rolling landscape, bounded by the Baraboo Range to the north and the Wisconsin River Valley to the south, characterizes the outwash prairie. The area is largely in agricultural use due to the rich soils left from glacial outwash. The Badger Army Ammunition Plant occupies much of the area and has a strong visual affect on the landscape.



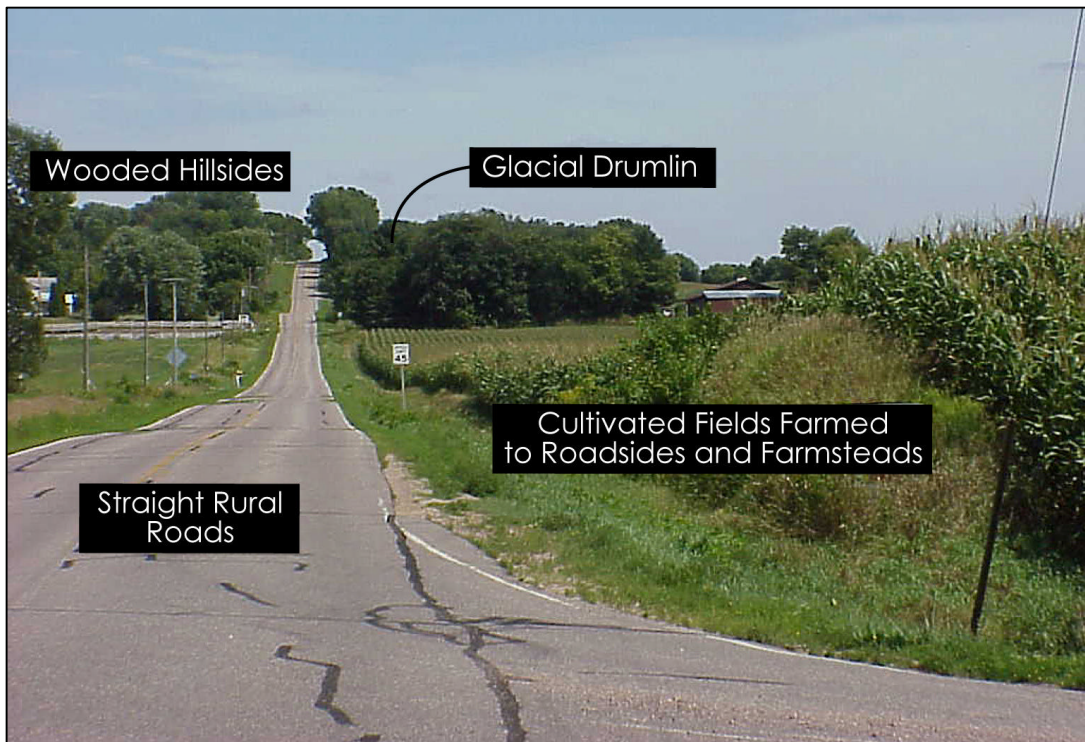
d) Baraboo River Valley

A flat glaciated landscape characterizes the Baraboo River Valley. The Baraboo Range surrounds the Baraboo River Valley. The Baraboo River and surrounding agricultural land extends east to the Wisconsin River. Wetlands exist in lowland areas. Rural settlements, such as North Freedom and Rock Springs, historically developed in crossroad areas and along rail lines.



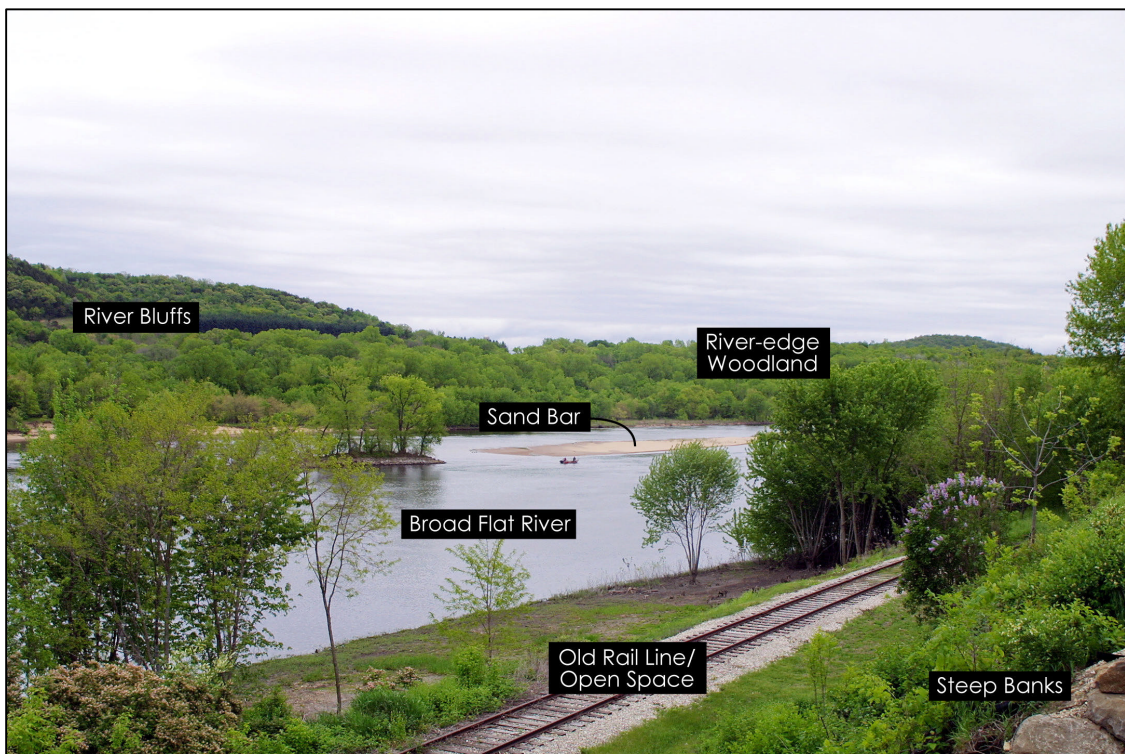
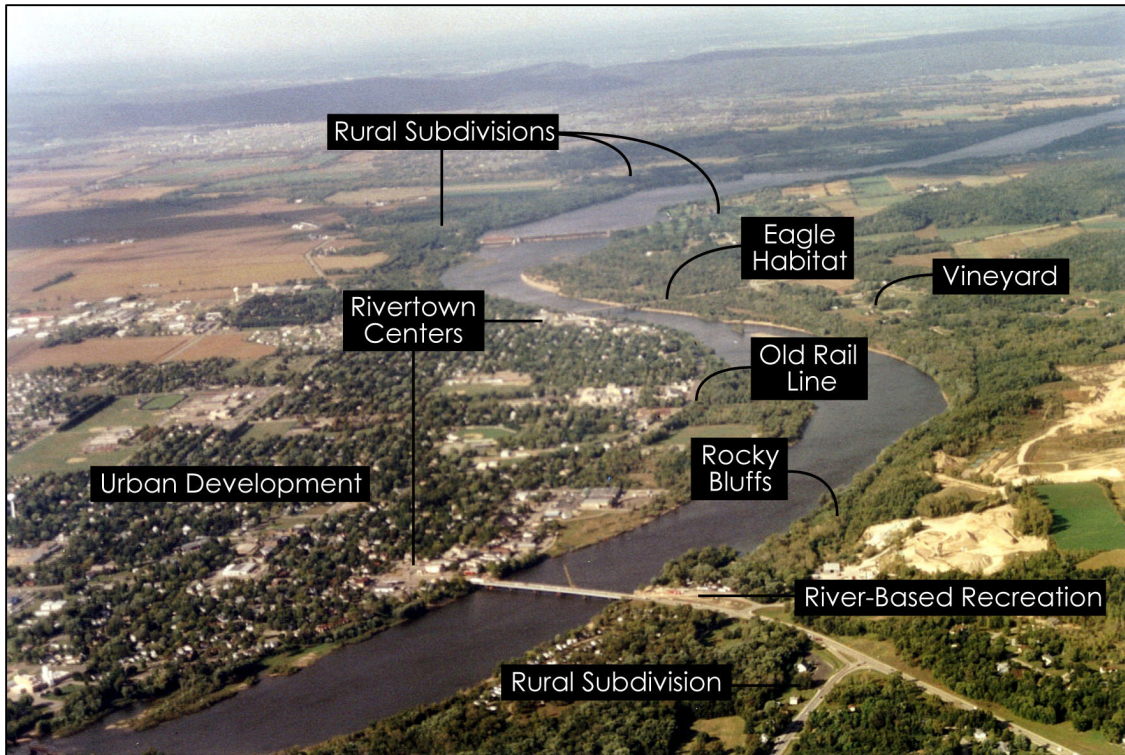
e) Rolling Highland Agriculture

This highland area is diverse in landscape features. Cultivated flat-to-rolling fields with scattered farmsteads are typical of this area. Glaciated rolling ground moraines are surrounded by wooded hillsides. The Wisconsin River bluffs and the Baraboo Range mark long views from this area.



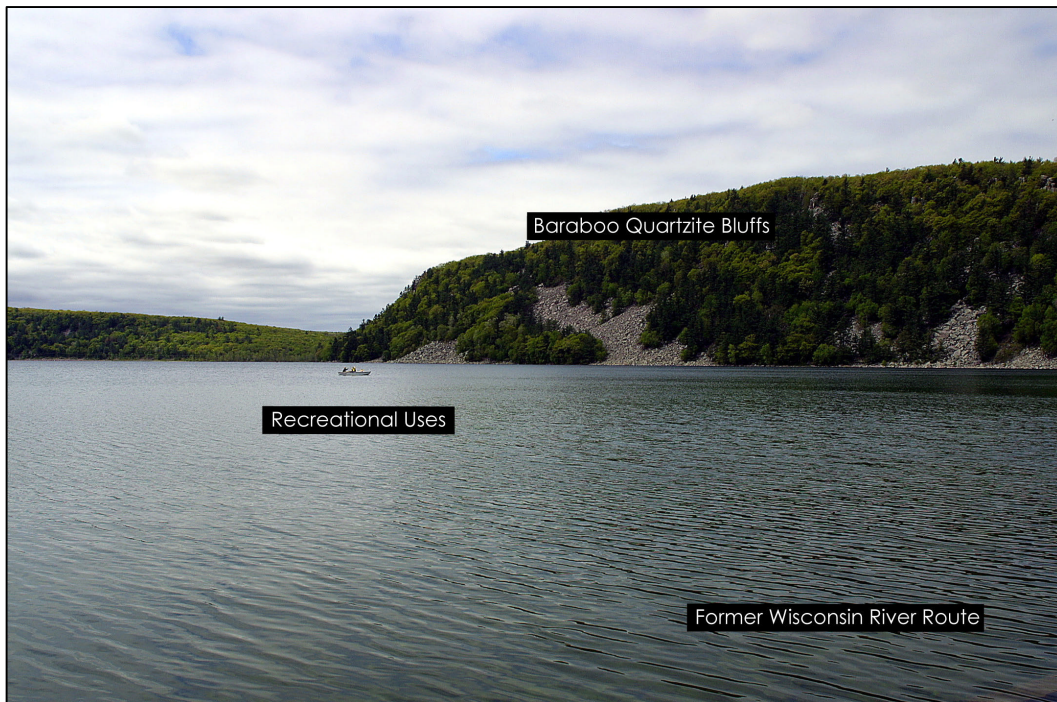
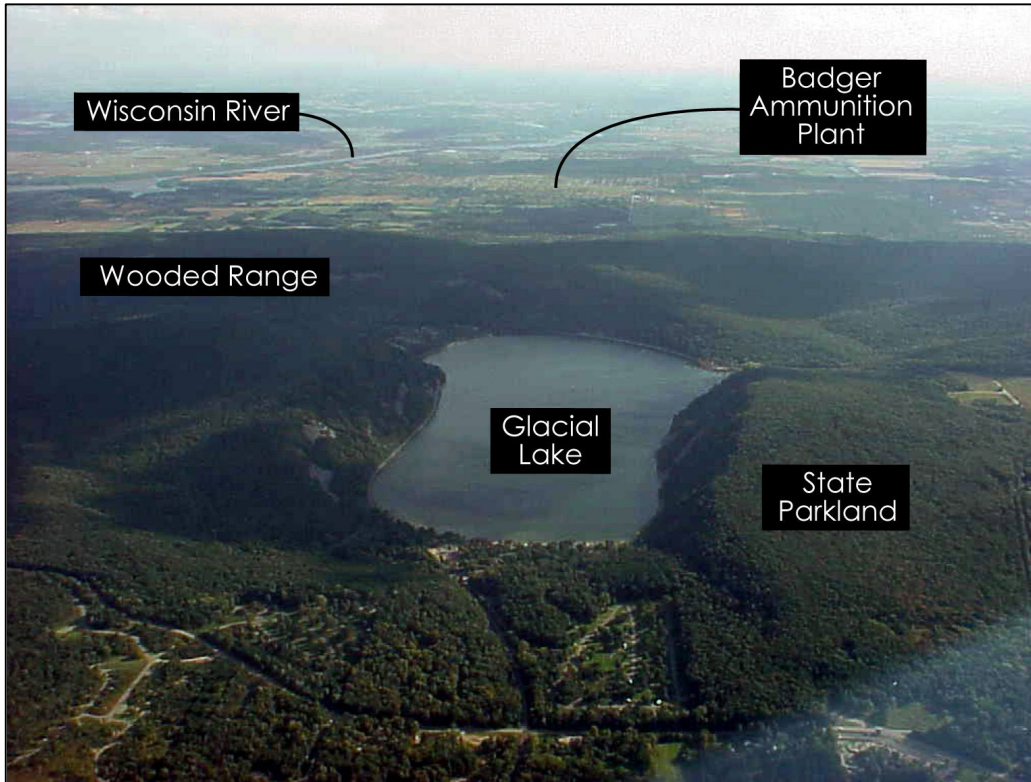
f) Wisconsin River Valley

Broad expanses of river surrounded by river-edge woodlands and rocky bluffs characterize the Wisconsin River Valley. This corridor contains a wide range of features including shifting sand bars, floodplain forests, brackish waters, rocky bluffs, and eagle habitats. Communities such as Sauk City and Prairie du Sac were formed with strong relationships to the river.



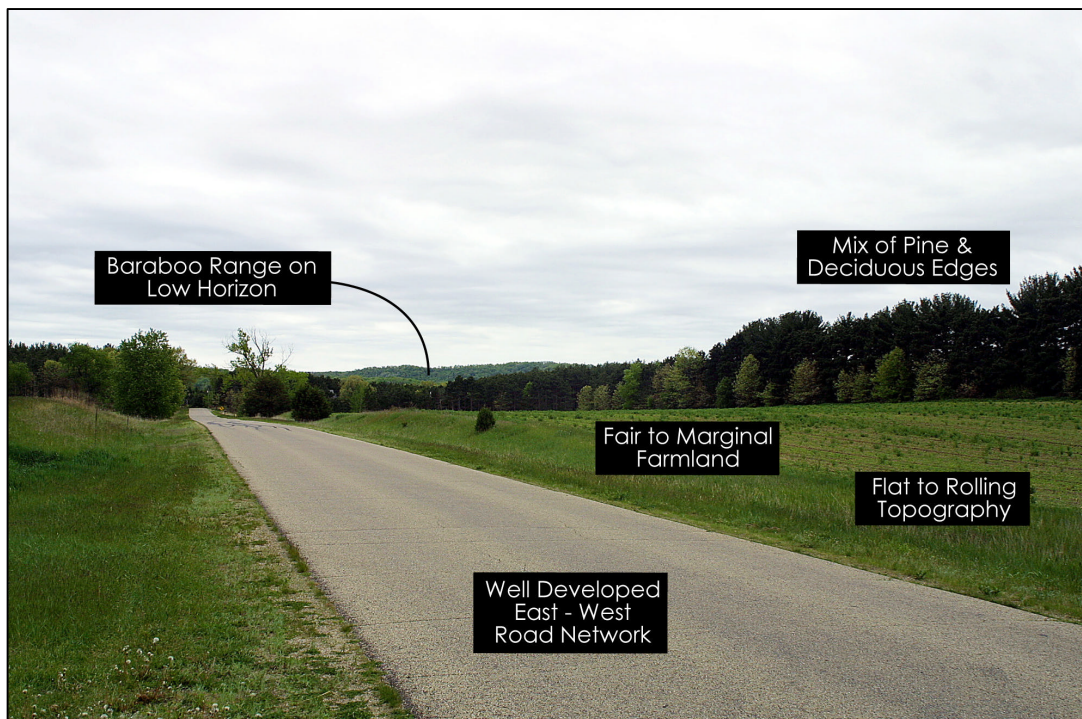
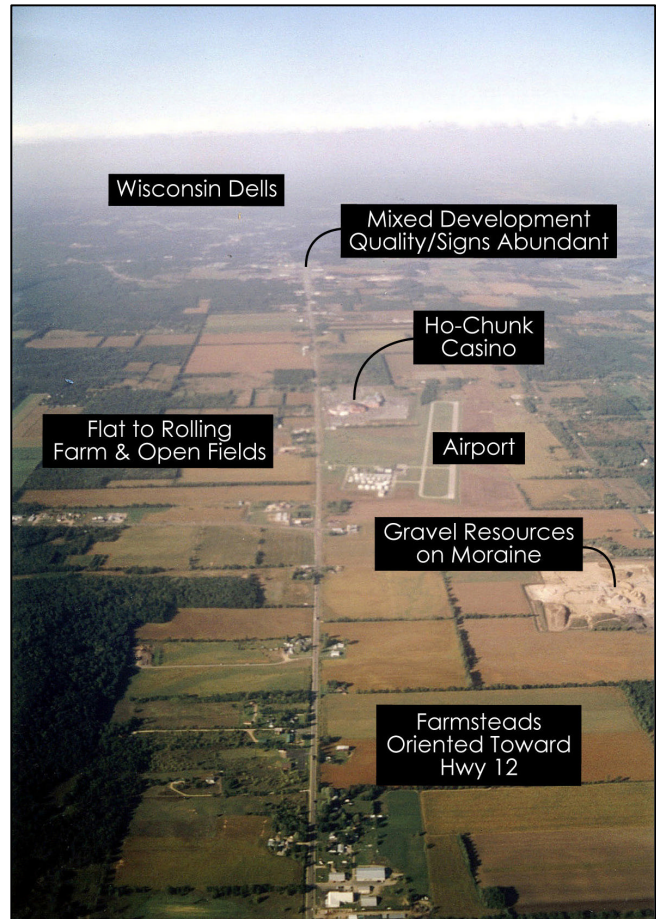
g) Devil's Lake

Devil's Lake is a groundwater-fed lake surrounded by the wooded Baraboo Range. The lake formed when the Green Bay lobe of the last glaciation blocked the Wisconsin River from flowing through the Baraboo Range. The resulting lake has historically been a popular recreation spot for swimming, canoeing, and fishing.



h) Highland

Cultivated flat-to-rolling fields and scattered farmsteads characterize the highland area. The Wisconsin River bluffs and the Baraboo Range mark long views from this area. The highland areas are higher in elevation than the outwash prairie, though each area was formed by glacial outwash. Billboards advertising area attractions are abundant. Commercial buildings of mixed quality are scattered throughout the area. The Ho-Chunk Casino is also located in this area.



Map 7: Landscape Personalities – Human Settlement Traits

2. Landscape Personality—Human Settlement Traits

a) Prairie du Sac & Sauk City

The Villages of Prairie du Sac and Sauk City developed as separate communities. Both villages have vibrant historic downtowns located along the western banks of Wisconsin River. Development in the villages generally reflects their small-town character including older, traditional neighborhoods; newer, more suburban edge neighborhoods; small-scale neighborhood businesses; auto-oriented commercial businesses; and newer industrial parks. Nature-based tourism is increasingly visible in the built environment, particularly focused around river activities and bald eagle watching.

b) Badger Army Ammunition Plant

Although inactive since the Vietnam War, the 7,354-acre Badger Army Ammunition Plant remains a dominant feature on the landscape. It was built by the United States Army in 1942, and employed up to 7,500 people at its peak. There are currently over 1,400 buildings on the site. Following the Army's and U.S. Government's decision to dispose of Badger, various interested parties have arrived at local consensus on its future. It is intended to be restored to a natural, recreational, and farming area.



c) Baraboo & West Baraboo

The City of Baraboo was founded in 1882 as a trading center for the lumber industry along the Baraboo River. The downtown includes an historic square, the Sauk County Courthouse, the refurbished A.L. Ringling Theater, and a variety of thriving service and retail establishments. The Baraboo Area is known for its circus history, now focused at Circus World Museum, which is located on the original winter quarters for the Ringling Brothers Circus on the Baraboo River. West Baraboo is generally located west of the City of Baraboo near Highway 12. The Baraboo Area communities serve as a regional retail and industrial center. Highway commercial uses characterize the Highway 12 driving experience through both communities.



d) Wisconsin Dells & Lake Delton

The City of Wisconsin Dells was founded around 1857 at the intersection of the railroad and the Wisconsin River. The Wisconsin Dells area has a rich Native American history. The Ho-Chunk Native American tribe cultivated crops in the area. The present city location was formerly a trading center for the Native American tribes. Native American history and the natural beauty of the sandstone formations, known as the Dells, were the foundations for tourism activity in the area, which began in the mid-1800s.



Tourism has expanded in the last century—and particularly the last 20 years—to include large-scale family-oriented indoor/outdoor water parks, miniature golf courses, go-cart tracks, and shopping centers.

e) Rock Springs and North Freedom

Rock Springs and North Freedom are historic crossroad/rail communities that served the local farming community. Rock Springs is known for its artesian well, which is open for public use. North Freedom is most known for its Mid-Continent Railway and Museum.

f) Reedsburg

The City of Reedsburg was founded in the 1840s around the lumber industry and limited mining operations in the area. Reedsburg is an important employment center, with Lands’ End and Grede Foundries, which together employ roughly 2,000 people. The City’s historic downtown serves as the trailhead for the “400” State Trail, which runs 22 miles to Elroy where it connects to the Elroy-Sparta State Trail.

3. Highway 12 Viewshed Analysis

For better or worse, the visual appearance from and around Highway 12 is of critical importance in defining the character of the Study Area. Map 8 depicts an analysis of the current viewshed from Highway 12. Four distinct visual experiences exist along Highway 12 in Sauk County. Driving from south to north, they are described below.



a) Open Farmland

The open farmland, located between the Baraboo Range and Dane County, contains fertile soils due to glacial outwash. Historically this area has been prairie, followed by agricultural cropland after settlers arrived in Sauk County. Views are dominated by flat to rolling farmland with backdrops of the Driftless Area to the west, Baraboo Range to the north, and Wisconsin River bluffs to the east and south. Farmsteads are prominent on the landscape, with a few residential homes scattered throughout the area.

b) Baraboo Range

The Baraboo Range contains a wooded southern and northern range that align in an east-west direction. This parallel land formation limits views from southern Sauk County to northern Sauk County and vice-versa. Long ridge-top vistas exist down the ridgeline of the southern range. Devil's Lake is not visible from the highway because the southern Baraboo Range surrounds the lake. The Badger Army Ammunition Plant, which sits at the southern base of the Baraboo Range, offers a much different visual experience than the natural views along the ridgetops.



c) Suburban Development and Signage

The stretch of Highway 12 within the Baraboo Area reflects a more urban viewshed. The area contains regional shopping destinations, franchise signage, traffic signals, large parking lots, and other typical suburban visual characteristics.



d) Open Farmland with Billboards

The farmland of northern Sauk County has similar visual characteristics as the farmland of southern Sauk County. Gently rolling agricultural land and farmsteads with Driftless Area background landscapes form the most common visual scene in this area. However, a variety of mixed-quality commercial buildings and numerous billboards advertising tourist destinations in the Wisconsin Dells area break up the view of farmland along this stretch of Highway 12. The Ho-Chuck Casino and Hotel has a dominant visual presence in this area.



Map 8: Highway 12 Viewshed Analysis

C. Opportunities

1. Regional Opportunities

Sauk County is strategically located within a large regional population and recreation area. This location and the area's wealth of assets offer opportunities that will help drive the future growth and health of the Study Area. These opportunities are based on the transportation accessibility, historic downtowns, growing regional and local population base, and clusters of tourist destinations. The key regional opportunities are described below and presented on Map 9.

a) Transportation

Interstate 90/94, with its connections to major urban centers including Chicago, Milwaukee, and Minneapolis/Saint Paul, provides excellent access to the Study Area. Highways, including Highway 12, provide access to and from adjacent communities and regional markets such as Dane County and the City of Madison. This access to regional markets supports both traditional forms of economic development (e.g., industrial parks) and continued tourism growth. Amtrak, possible excursion rail, the proposed high-speed rail connection between Chicago, Milwaukee, and the Twin Cities, and Baraboo-Dells Airport expansion may improve that accessibility, providing visitors with an alternative means of traveling to the area. Two of Wisconsin's best-known recreational trails, the "400" Trail/Elroy-Sparta Trail and the Ice Age Trail, currently pass near or through the Study Area.

b) Historic Downtowns

Sauk County boasts several historic downtowns. Many are well-established economic centers and tourist destinations, such as Spring Green and Baraboo, or have invested in the revitalization of their downtowns, such as Reedsburg and Prairie Du Sac. These historic downtowns provide important local and regional shopping and business opportunities and a network of varied tourist destinations catering to the different tourist populations. In addition, this network of historic downtowns helps to tell the story of the region's development.



c) Dane County and Madison

Home to the state capital and the University of Wisconsin, the City of Madison and the surrounding communities have established themselves as a growing center for knowledge-based industry. The State of Wisconsin, through such initiatives as BioStar and a Technology Zone designation, is defining the Madison metro area as a center for high technology. Knowledge workers tend to choose where to live first and then look for a job. They require a high-quality of life with access to vital urban centers, entertainment, and recreational activities. This knowledge workforce is a major part of the local visitor base that will view the Study Area as a kind of recreational playground. Some Sauk County communities are already serving as commuter housing communities for employees in Dane County and on Madison's far west side. As Highway 12 is expanded in Dane County in the near-term and in Sauk County in the long-term, Sauk County will become more accessible as a potential commuter housing location to additional workers in Dane County, which may be viewed as both an opportunity and a threat. The Sauk Prairie Area also has an opportunity to future develop its technology-based businesses and jobs, given its proximity to Madison, its high quality of life, and its existing business mix.

Map 9: Regional Influences & Opportunities



Map 10: Study Area Opportunities



d) Tourist Destination Clusters

The Wisconsin Dells/Lake Delton area is the predominant tourist destination cluster in the region. There are several other clusters of tourist destinations within the Study area, including Devil's Lake State Park, Mirror Lake State Park, Lake Virginia, Lake Redstone, Dutch Hollow, numerous conservancy areas, and Circus World Museum. The Wisconsin River and Lake Wisconsin links other tourism clusters, is a state-designated Scenic Riverway in its southern stretches, and is a destination of many float trip enthusiasts.

There are numerous other tourism clusters located in the surrounding region. These clusters include the vacation homes located on Pentenwell Lake, Castle Rock Lake, Green Lake, and Puckaway Lake as well as the cultural and environmental destinations located in the Driftless Area, including Blue Mounds, Mount Horeb, New Glarus, Spring Green, Dodgeville, and Mineral Point. Like the historic downtowns, these destination clusters will add to the wealth of tourist activities, complementing rather than competing with those in Sauk County.

2. Study Area Opportunities

Study Area opportunities are largely clustered near the Highway 12 corridor, including an improved existing Highway 12 and proposed realignments. These opportunities include greater marketability of nature-, heritage-, and commercial-based tourist destinations, growth in traditional job and retail developments serving local and regional residents, preservation of agricultural uses on the “outside” of proposed Highway 12 realignments, the expansion of new markets for local agricultural products, and the preservation of small-town living environments. These opportunities are addressed in turn below; many are also illustrated on Map 9.

a) Tourism

As discussed above, opportunities for tourism were and continue to be based on the outdoor experience provided by natural and recreational assets. With greater access as well as careful management and preservation, the multitude of outdoor activities available – biking, hiking, climbing, canoeing, kayaking, fishing, boating, hunting, camping, nature viewing – have the capacity to expand the Study Area as a center for eco-tourism. There are opportunities to cooperatively develop and market these recreational activities to a growing, eager market. For example, there exists an opportunity to complete the Ice Age Trail and connect a multi-use path from Reedsburg to Sauk City.



The existing tourist entertainment destinations, including the Ho-Chunk Casino, Circus World Museum, and the hotels and water parks located in the Wisconsin Dells/Lake Delton area provide a well-established market niche. The continued growth potential for this niche, if carefully planned, will provide a significant economic growth opportunity for the Study Area. As evidenced by the transformation of entertainment and gaming venues on the east coast and in the west, the emerging entertainment niche in the Study Area has the opportunity to invent itself as a quality regional destination. Finally, the co-marketing of the eco-tourist activities, cultural destinations, and local festivals in conjunction with the tourist entertainment activities will create a unique tourist destination with the capacity to meet a wide range of needs and interests.

b) “Traditional” Economic Development

The accessibility created by Highway 12, a growing local resident base, and industrial entrepreneurship also bode well for continued growth in the industrial development sector. These opportunities largely take the form in helping existing Study Area businesses grow. There are also opportunities for Study Area communities to cooperatively plan for and benefit from new industrial parks. Growing sectors include technology-based businesses, food processing, and plastics. The recognition that production-based businesses will continue to play a key role in the regional economy should not be overlooked.

c) Agriculture

Preservation of the Study Area’s agricultural uses and heritage is an important component of the future growth, both economic and physical. The changing national market for agricultural products, including the demand for organic products, value-added agriculture, niche and specialty crop markets, and the role for agriculture in biotechnology, create a significant opportunity for agriculture-based economic growth. The existence of an economic driver for agricultural preservation creates a secondary, though equally important, result – the preservation of the rural character and scenic views, which are valued by residents and visitors alike.

Agricultural tourism provides another opportunity to add value to the local agricultural economy. In conjunction with other heritage-based tourism activities in the area, local farmers’ markets, day-on-the-farm and pick-your-own programs, winery tours, the Sauk County fair, Wisconsin State Cow Chip Throw, and other local festivals provide families with a variety a day-tripping activities for both residents and visitors.



d) Small Town Living

The quality of life provided by the city and villages within the Highway 12 Corridor is an opportunity for community growth and sustainability. These places offer opportunities (and for some alternatives) through their small-town atmospheres, affordable housing, access to jobs, and proximity to the recreational and entertainment assets of the region. The increased access provided by the improvement of existing Highway 12, particularly for the Sauk Prairie area, will attract new residents, particularly young families, seeking a quality, affordable, living environment. The City of Baraboo will also attract new residents, providing access to the job markets locally and in Reedsburg and Madison.

D. Overall Vision and Goals for Study Area

The Advisory Committee refined the results of the Regional Opportunities Analysis, the several public input opportunities, and inventory work into a short vision statement and set of goals for the entire Study Area. The vision and goals, included as Figure 6, provided the overall framework for the more detailed opportunities and recommendations for each planning district, presented in the following chapter.

Figure 6: Vision Statement

