Chapter 1: Boone County Overview
Introduction

Boone County has traditionally been known as a rural and agricultural-based county since its founding in 1837. The flat terrain of a landscape left behind from the glacial ice age provides spectacular soils for agricultural production, several flowing streams and rivers, ecologically rich wetlands, and pockets of thick wooded areas. While development has occurred over time, the county still prides itself on preservation and conservation of land and natural resources. Today, the county is considered a family-friendly, conservation-oriented, and truly livable collection of communities with a high quality of life.

Local and Regional Context

Boone County has an area of 280 square miles, one of the smallest northern tier counties. It is located in Northern Illinois along the Illinois-Wisconsin border and sits in a unique and strategically significant position because of its proximity to major population centers and location within the Rockford Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). The county shares a border with Winnebago County to the west, Wisconsin to the north, and the Chicago exurbs to the east and south. This position has allowed the county to grow as a transportation crossroads between several major cities.

![Surrounding County Populations](image1)

![Regional Context](image2)

Source: Boone County GIS Department, 2015; Region 1 Planning Council, 2018.
There are a total of five incorporated areas located entirely within Boone County. In the south-central portion of the county sits the City of Belvidere with a population of 25,741. The city has the largest population and economic center of the county and is strategically located along several major transportation corridors, such as I-90 with access to Chicago and north towards Wisconsin. Along the western side of the county, near the Winnebago-Boone County border, sits the Village of Caledonia. It is a small bedroom community with a total population of just 219 that has just become incorporated in the past 25 years (est. 1995). On the eastern side of the county, near the McHenry-Boone County line, sits the Village of Capron. It is another small bedroom community with a population of 1,846. In the center of the county, at the crossroads of Highway 173 and Highway 76, sits the Village of Poplar Grove. It is the second largest incorporated area in the county with a population of 5,258. Finally, located between Poplar Grove, Candlewick Lake, and Caledonia sits the Village of Timberlane. It was also incorporated in the past 25 years (est. 1995), and has a population of 937.²

There are additionally two other municipalities with boundaries that extend into Boone County, the City of Loves Park and the Village of Cherry Valley. Both are predominantly located in Winnebago County, but have extended their borders through annexation into Boone County over the past 25 years.

**Demographics**

The county’s population has seen some significant changes over the past 60 years. Between 1950 and 1980, the county grew at a relatively steady and consistent pace, but during the 1990s and 2000s a population boom occurred, and by 2010 the total population had nearly doubled to 54,165. Since 2010, the county’s population has plateaued and even seen a slight decline. The most recent total population of Boone County was 53,851 in 2015.³

That population growth has occurred in multiple locations within Boone County. While the majority of development is centralized around the incorporated municipalities of the county, some has taken place within the unincorporated areas too. Between 2000 and 2015, population totals within incorporated areas increased by 10,419 and within unincorporated areas by 1,646.⁴
The average age of Boone County’s population has also experienced a shift over the past few decades. In 1990, the median age was 33.1, by 2000 it had risen to 34.5, and by 2015 it was up to 38.2. Additionally, between 2000-2015, the percentage of residents younger than 34 years decreased by nearly 5%. The County, much like many parts of suburban and rural America, is seeing a shift towards an increasing larger portion of the population being over age 60.

On the contrary, Boone County is trending in the opposite direction of the nation when it comes to household size. As many Americans are now having less children, the opposite has been seen over the past 20 years in Boone County. The average household size was 2.84 in 2000 and has since increased slightly to 2.95 in 2015.

Historically, the county has been very culturally and ethnically homogeneous. However, similar to many other Midwestern counties over the past 30 years, a transformation to a more diversified population has taken place. Between 1990 and 2015, people of Hispanic origin increased from 6.4% of the total population to 20.4%. The majority of this increase has been concentrated within the incorporated areas of the county.

Following national trends, Boone County has seen educational attainment continue to rise over the past 20 years. In 2000, 80.8% of residents age 25 or older had at least a high school degree and 14% had at least a bachelor’s degree. To be expected, in 2015, both of those figures have improved, with 86.7% having at least a high school degree and 20.2% at least having a bachelor’s degree. However, these educational attainment levels still lag behind the state’s figures (87.9% and 32.3%).

In connection with the Great Recession and lack of any kind of significant recovery in the region, Boone County’s poverty rate has risen over the past 20 years. Between 2000-2015, the percentage of the population in poverty rose from 7% to nearly 11%. A very similar trend occurred concurrently with the percentage of families in poverty, 5% in 2000 up to 9% in 2015. Not surprisingly median household incomes has a comparable story. In 2000, the median household income was $52,397. That figure rose significantly during the next decade to $61,210, but in line with a decreasing population and increasing poverty rates, that number fell to $58,248 in 2015.
Within the Rockford Region, manufacturing has been the most important industry sector in driving much of the growth historically. Today, manufacturing is still a strong and vital component to the regional economy and the labor force reflects that. In 2015, Boone County had 15,438 total people working within the county and 8,628 of those people were employed within the manufacturing sector. Comparatively in 2005, there were 11,718 total people who worked in the county and 4,342 of them were employed in the manufacturing sector.10

**Historical Growth Patterns**

In general, the overwhelming majority of land in Boone County has historically been in some type of agricultural or open space use since the county was settled in the mid-1800s. For the first 100 years, Boone County saw very little growth and development take place and the growth it did experience centered around the City of Belvidere. The city was founded in 1851 around the utilization of the Kishwaukee River and railroad. For many years, almost all development in the county took place in Belvidere, with some small pockets in Capron, Poplar Grove, and Caledonia. However, after US Interstate 90 was completed in the mid-1950s (connecting Rockford to Chicago) and owning a personal vehicle became much more prevalent in American households, the suburbanization and sprawling nature of development became more prominent. At the same time, the City of Rockford, and its adjacent municipalities in Winnebago County, began to grow and stretch further toward both the interstate highway and Wisconsin-Illinois state line. In the mid-1960s, Chrysler built its Belvidere Assembly Plant along I-90, just southeast of Belvidere. It quickly became the largest employer in the region and still is today. The building of the plant, along with Rockford’s expansion, contributed to steady and continuous growth between 1950 and 1990 county-wide.

Between 1990 and 2010, Boone County saw its most dramatic and land intensive growth patterns take place. Belvidere continued its expansion to the north, south, and west. Poplar Grove grew by five times its population.11 Additionally, a significant number of residential subdivisions started developing on the far west side of the county in unincorporated areas between Caledonia and Highway 20. Many of these subdivisions were in the form of large-lots (1-5 acres) with curvilinear streets and upscale homes. The demand for these homes was driven by the availability of land, proximity to Rockford and the Chicago suburbs, and a strong housing market of the 1990s and early 2000s. Overall, this era of development sparked the building of several new public institutional facilities, the formation of new municipalities, and the massive border expansion of existing incorporated areas within Boone County.

It all came to a screeching halt in 2008 when the Great Recession derailed the national housing market and slowed the entire global economy. As a result, Boone County and the Rockford Metropolitan Statistical Area at-large saw very little growth between 2010 and 2015. Over the past few years, however, some new development has started again, but nowhere near the peak levels experienced during pre-recession times. This has left many residential subdivisions in both the incorporated and unincorporated portions of the county only partially developed, multiple public facilities drastically underutilized, and several empty platted commercial and industrial areas. A map of urbanized growth can be found in Figure 1.11 on the following page.
FIGURE 1.11
CHANGE IN URBANIZED AREA

KEY
- Urbanized Area in 2000
- New Urbanized Area Since 2000
- Municipalities
- Townships
- Boone County

Source: Boone County GIS Department, 2015; Region 1 Planning Council, 2018.
History of Comprehensive Planning

Seven Comprehensive or Land Use based plans have been developed for Boone County prior to 2018.

- 1966 – Belvidere and Boone County Comprehensive Plan
- 1974 – Land Use Plan – Belvidere and Boone County, Illinois
- 1981 – Land Use Plan Belvidere/Boone County
- 1997 – West Hills Neighborhood Land Use Plan
- 1999 – Boone County Comprehensive Plan
- 2006 – Flora Neighborhood Land Use Plan

The most recent full rewrite of the Boone County Comprehensive Plan was in 1999. Nearing the height of the county’s population boom and feeling the pressure of continuous development, government officials hired Vandewalle & Associates to develop the county-wide comprehensive plan. This document included both incorporated and unincorporated areas of the county, and was heavily focused on land use practices. It proved to be a significant and influential plan that helped guide and shape development practices county-wide. The plan’s original time horizon was 20 years, and is at the end of its lifespan.

1974 Future Land Use Map
Chapter 1 Sources

Text

Figures
2. R1PC and Boone County GIS, 2017.