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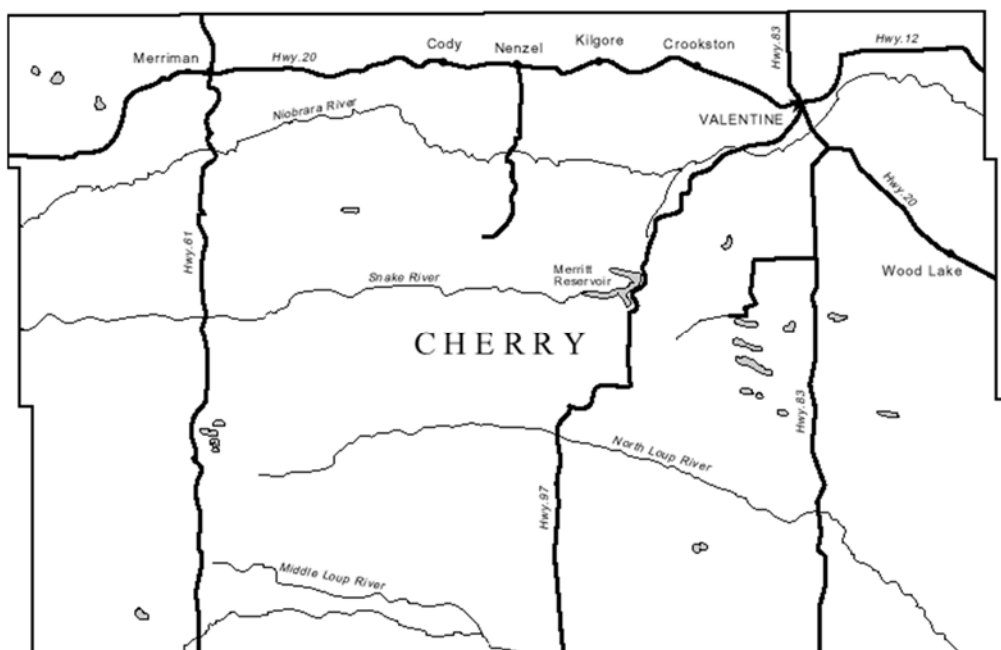
# EXISTING LAND USE ANALYSIS

An evaluation of the land uses that presently exist within Cherry County, Nebraska is critical to the formulation of this Comprehensive Development Plan. It is the type and location of the existing land uses which provides the starting point for formulating a plan for the future physical development of the County and the basis for the formulation of workable zoning regulations to protect existing uses and promote desired future uses.

## Physical Character

In order to properly understand the impact of the existing land uses within the County and the overall trends in the location and extent of the existing land uses it is important to review to physical character of the County. This type of examination unveils why certain land uses exist and what land use trends have occurred and, in turn, details limitations of why development has not occurred in other areas. The following is a brief synopsis of the physical character of Cherry County.

Cherry County is located in the north-central portion of the State of Nebraska and has a total land area of 3,845,197 acres or 6,008 square miles. Urban development within the County occurred along the former rail line that extended from east to west in the northern portion of the County. These small urban settlements were generally located at 10 to 12 miles apart, reflecting the limitations in modes of travel and thus travel distances during the original settlement of the County.



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Historically, the goods and services provided and produced in Cherry County revolved around cattle production. Today, over 3,670,000 acres or 97% of the land area in the County is utilized for cattle and some limited agricultural crop production. Approximately 3% of the land is used for ranch steads, roadways urban areas and surface water areas.

The major transportation routes within the County have impacted the existing land use patterns in the County and will continue to influence future land use development within the County. Aside from the fact that these major highways provide intra-county access to the urban areas, as well as, provide further access to larger regional and national transportation routes and urban areas outside of the County, they provide ideal locations for commercial business and industry within the County. Existing commercial and industrial development has been primarily located in close proximity to the major highways within the County generally in or near an urban area within the County.

The location of residential uses in the rural areas of the County has been substantially influenced by one primary factor, that being the native rangelands used for cattle production and large size of the ranching operations. In 2010, there were only 1,039 occupied residences in the rural areas of the County. This computes to only one residence in an average of 5.6 square miles, a very low density.



Other factors affecting residential uses include the locations of the various highways and municipalities in the County and the topography of the County. Slightly higher concentrations of rural housing occur near the municipalities in the County, reflecting development of some non-ranch residential uses.

Understanding these physical characteristics of the County provides a better understanding of why land uses have developed in the way they exist now and provides insight into which trends should be continued and what planning policies should be utilized in the future. Such planning should continue upon the land use trends that have been positive in nature and avoid away past and present land use trends that have had a negative impact in the County and on its citizens and taxpayers.

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An evaluation of the detailed land uses that presently exist within the County is critical to the formulation of its Comprehensive Development Plan.

### **Rural Residential Uses**

In 2000 there were a total of 1,063 occupied residential structures in the unincorporated areas of Cherry County. By 2010 the total number of occupied residences in the rural areas had declined to 1,039. Given that from 2000 to 2010 there was an overall increase in occupied housing in the County of 22 units, it becomes readily apparent that there are an increasing number of non-farm residential uses located in the urban areas of the County.

### **Rural Commercial Uses**

Over the years, rural commercial and industrial land use locations have created a definite pattern. Virtually all recent commercial and industrial uses in the County have been located on sites adjoining the highways in or near the municipalities in the County. Any future commercial and industrial development in the rural areas of Cherry County, with the exception of home-based businesses operated by ranchers, such uses should be restricted to locations within or near the municipalities in the County.

### **Public and Semi-Public Uses**

A variety of public and semi-public uses including local churches, cemeteries, historic sites, and recreation areas and various types of governmental facilities exist in the rural areas of the County. These land uses, when combined, comprise the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest land use in the County. Specific facilities that exist in the rural areas of the County include the Valentine Fish Hatchery, east of Valentine, which is operated by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

Part of the Nebraska National Forest of the United States Forest Service is in Cherry County. The Samuel R. McKelvie National Forest is a part of the Bessey Ranger District and contains 116,000 acres of native prairie that includes 2,200 acres of manmade forest. Recreational opportunities include camping, hiking, wildlife observation, and hunting upland game, waterfowl, and deer.



The 9,000-acre Merritt Reservoir State Recreation Area is one of Nebraska’s premier fishing and water sports areas. The area has facilities for camping, picnicking, hiking, boating, boat rental, hunting, fishing, swimming, and winter sports. It also has lodges and cabins, food service, and a dump station.

The Niobrara River corridor east of the City of Valentine, which runs through the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge, has been designated a National Scenic River and as one of the most scenic rivers in the Country, brings tourists into the County every year.



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The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission operates several other areas in Cherry County. The Bowring Ranch State Historical Park, just north of Merriman, has a historical center and camping facilities. The 240-acre Cottonwood Lake State Recreation Area, just southeast of Merriman, offers picnic shelters, boating, fishing, hunting, hiking, and primitive sanitation facilities for camping. The Cowboy Trail for hiking and biking crosses the northern part of the county on an old railroad bed. Towns along this trail include Wood Lake, Valentine, Crookston, Kilgore, Nenzel, Cody, and Merriman.



Several wildlife management areas in the rural areas of the County include the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge, Ballards Marsh, Big Alkali Lake, Rat and Beaver Lakes, Schlagel Creek, Willow Lake, Borman Bridge, Anderson Bridge, and Shell Lake. Most of these areas provide fishing and hunting opportunities. Ballards Marsh and Big Alkali Lake have primitive camping facilities.



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These public facilities located in the rural areas of Cherry County serve to attract tourists, fishermen and hunters into the County, but will have little impact future land use development in the County.

### **Public Road and Highway Use**

Public road rights-of-way for the highways in the County and County roads occupy nearly 8,000 acres of land in the County. The use of nearly 12 square miles of land for roads in the County makes roads and highways a notable land use in the County. The County roadways are somewhat evenly distributed throughout the County and will continue to influence non-agricultural development which should be restricted to areas within or near the municipalities in the County.

### **LAND USE TRENDS AND OBSERVATIONS**

The land use pattern in Cherry County has undergone few notable changes during the last decade. The overall existing land use pattern in Cherry County is one of decreasing residential density in the rural areas of the County, but increasing in the urban areas of the County. Additional commercial and industrial uses have occurred to a limited extent along Highway 20, particularly near the City of Valentine.

A primary objective of the Future Land Use Plan and zoning regulations should be to assure that new land uses, which may be developed, be located and constructed in a manner which is compatible, not only with adjoining agricultural land uses, but with the environmental capacity of the land.