THE LITTLE TOWN THAT COULD

Building a rural sense of place in Dunn.

TEXT BY ERIK NESS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF MILLER

Margaret Lalor, above, a town of Dunn resident, still lives on the 157-acre farmstead her grandfather settled in 1846. The town of Dunn, on the edge of burgeoning Dane County, has avoided being claim-jumped by suburbia with a visionary land-use plan that stops sprawl, keeps taxes down and preserves the environment.

MARGARET LALOR MIGHT never have lived out her long life in the town of Dunn if not for a bit of frontier chicanery. In 1846, her grandfather, a recent immigrant from Ireland, decided he didn't much like the patch of Indiana he first settled. In search of kinder soil, he found his way to Wisconsin, staked a claim in Fitchburg, then left for Indiana to collect his new wife.

But returning to their new home, her grandparents discovered another farmer working their plot; they had been claim-jumped. "He had to get another parcel, and to pick out a parcel he had to go to Milwaukee," relates Lalor. "He was walking from Fitchburg and he walked through where I am now, and he saw a spring. Of course, water was a high item. And so he thought, 'I want this farm.' I don't know how he knew where it was, but when he got to Milwaukee and he looked at the land maps he said, 'I want that parcel.'

And so that's why we're here."

"Here" is 157 acres of field and woods hard on the border with the burgeoning city of Fitchburg and only a few minutes from the Madison line. "We used to have everything," says Lalor of the days when her father worked the land. "Cattle and sheep and pigs and chickens and turkeys and geese and ducks and everything.

It was an all-purpose farm; that's what all farmers did then." Lalor was a first-grade teacher for 43 years, but her brother continued to run the farm and train harness racing horses before he retired. Now the last of her family still on the land, Lalor leases the fields and laments that the woods are overgrown and the spring is a bit muddy. But come summer, chicory and Queen Anne's lace bloom on the rustic roadside, while corn races the sun in fields beyond.

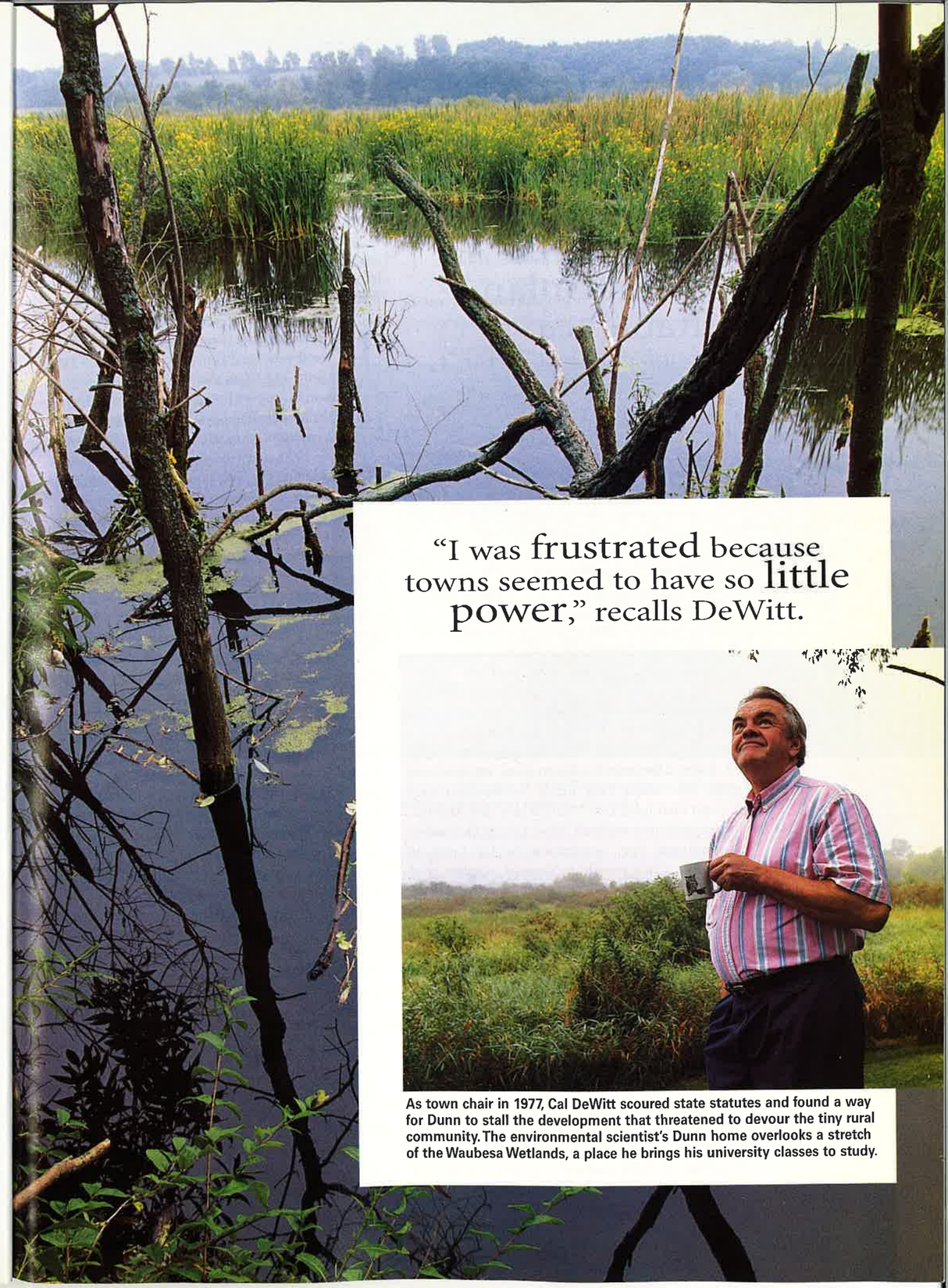
Communities need to plan for their futures, says current Dunn town chair Ed Minihan, above. In the background is the town hall where Dunn citizens did just that—decided what their town's future should be.

Dane County is one of the fastest-growing regions in the country, so you might expect subdivisions and zoning battles to be a fact of life for Lalor. But the little town of Dunn, population 5,461, has avoided being claim-jumped by suburbia with a visionary land-use plan that stops sprawl, keeps taxes down and conserves the environment. Since adopting it in 1979, Dunn has become a national model of successful planning. Thousands of copies of the plan have been sent to inquiring communities far and wide, and it has been used as a college text. In 1995 Dunn received a national award for growth management and regional planning from Renew America, a coalition of business, government and environmental organizations. And on Earth Day 1997, Dunn began an innovative new program to protect land by purchasing development rights, the first of its kind in Wisconsin.

Dunn hasn't closed the doors to change. "I have people on this road I don't know," says Lalor, sounding almost surprised by the fact. But Dunn has firmly taken the reigns of fate and steered its own course. "We were so close to Madison, and people could see what would happen to the farmland," recalls Lalor, who has been on the town's plan commission since its inception. "They began to see the implications if we developed. Or would we have controlled-growth? That's what we were seeking, and that's what we got, thanks be to God. We didn't cut growth out, but it was controlled, and it works."

PAMELA HARDEN

Cal DeWitt remembers wondering one shimmering-hot summer day about the destination of dump truck he saw heading east on a Dunn road that leads only to Lake Waubesa. As town chairman at the time, he decided to find out, following as the truck worked its way toward the lake and finally emptied its load into a marsh. Watching the manufacture of prime



"I was frustrated because towns seemed to have so little power," recalls DeWitt.

As town chair in 1977, Cal DeWitt scoured state statutes and found a way for Dunn to stall the development that threatened to devour the tiny rural community. The environmental scientist's Dunn home overlooks a stretch of the Waubesa Wetlands, a place he brings his university classes to study.

lakefront property, DeWitt wondered gloomily whether any lake in Dunn—or for that matter, Wisconsin—could survive. "These were areas where the northern pike spawn and the very people who were working hard to find a place on the lake included those who would probably be fishing for northerns," says the UW-Madison environmental scientist. "They'd wonder where all the northerns went."

Dunn analyzed its tax base and found that farmland was profitable and development wasn't.

But DeWitt had more than wetlands to worry about. In 1977, Dunn faced in earnest the relentless march of subdivisions. Dane County was booming, and strangers were knocking on doors looking for land to buy. More than 300 lots were platted in Dunn in the first three months alone. At this rate, Dunn would be swallowed in short order, and the townsfolk would have no say-so in the matter.

"I was frustrated because towns seemed to have so little power," recalls DeWitt. He scoured state statutes until he found a way for Dunn to declare a one-time moratorium on all land-division for two years. It wasn't a solution, but it would buy some time. DeWitt had slammed on the brakes, and Dunn began an almost spiritual journey to find itself.

It began with lists: a roll call of plants, animals, lakes, streams, wetlands, woodlands, soil types, Indian mounds and more. Practically anything and everything that defined Dunn was marked and measured. By almost any yardstick, Dunn is an extraordinary place. The Yahara River drains the Madison lakes through Mud Lake, Lake Waubesa and Lake Kegonsa, forming extensive wetlands. Hook Lake to the south is a sphagnum bog, uncommon so far south in Wisconsin. Cranes reside in unusual numbers, and many fields and roadsides are now restored prairies. Though inventory is often a menial chore, for Dunn the result was extraordinary. "We fell in love with home," says DeWitt. "It was from that developing appreciation of our place that we moved vigorously to protect the treasures that we had discovered."

But taking stock was easy compared to the decisions that followed. For three years townsfolk met every Wednesday night, except for Christmas week. "We didn't put limits on how much people could speak," says DeWitt, "and as a result we actually had discussions rather than just hearings, and democracy runs in discussions."

Margaret Lalor's recollections are less idyllic. "We had town meetings that you wouldn't believe. One night they had to get the sheriff out," she says, chortling at the memory. "People were screaming and yelling and hollering. People are people. They came to the meetings and they expressed their dissatisfaction. They did not want the town of Dunn to be making rules about what they could or could not do with their land."

But that's exactly what they allowed to happen. Deciding that the wide-open spaces of their rural town were worth protecting, the plan commission's final plan limited subdivisions to only one per 35 acres of land. It wouldn't stop growth altogether, but it would keep the hordes of cloned-vinyl subdivisions at bay and give farmers some breathing room. When the votes were tallied, the plan won by a 2-1 margin.

Roz Gausman grew up in the city of Madison, and never really imagined herself as a farm wife. But when she fell in love with a man from Dunn, she grew a little bit country. She remembers husband Bill's family farm as "impressive and beautiful country" when she first visited. When they married in 1970, they received an acre of land on the farm as wedding gift. "We knew we were going to be living out here," she says.

It was a few more years before they took over the farm, but now Bill runs a dairy farm with 110 head of cattle that graze on 90 acres of pasture, while Roz works as the town clerk just up the road. In all they farm 222 acres, including approximately 100 acres of crops, and some wetland and woodland besides. Grazing dairy farms are a bit old-fashioned—most farmers grow fodder and feed it to the cattle on cement feed lots—but the Gausmans wanted to take as much land as possible out of cultivation to help preserve the soil.

This kind of stewardship is good for the town's conservation plan, and in turn, the town's land-use plan helps keep the Gausmans' farm alive. "It gives us a sense of security, that we're not going to be crowded out by subdivisions all around us," explains Roz. "Drive into other communities surrounding us, and you see farm fields being platted out and filling up with homes and a farmer right next door. I think it would be very difficult to farm under those conditions."

Farming communities need a critical mass of farmers to thrive, in part to sustain other related businesses, but also because farmers make good neighbors. The Gausmans are excited that next door is a new farmer who is also running a grazing dairy—the first new dairy farm in the township that people can remember. "If you have a farmer living next you, when your cows get out you have somebody who knows how to help get them back in, rather than panic or call the police," says Roz. "It's more conducive to farming if you have farmers next to each other and helping each other."

Supporting an agrarian economy is an important part of Dunn's vision, but Dunn is not an island. Though its land-use plan effectively quashed sprawl, the town was still losing agricultural land to creeping development through the 1980s and 1990s. On virtually every side there were rapidly growing communities, and people began to realize that if the current town board lost an election, or if a neighboring municipality decided to grow aggressively into Dunn, its fragile remaining agricultural base could founder.

Beginning in 1993, townspeople grappled with how best to solidify their conservation achievements. One option was to simply tighten zoning restrictions even further, but that seemed heavy-handed and politically unwise. Buying crucial parcels was another choice, but one with a high price tag.

Back at the drawing board, Dunn decided to look at the big picture and analyze its tax base. What it found was that development would not only destroy the town's character, but also drive up taxes. For every dollar in taxes it collected from residential areas, the town spent $1.06 in services; agricultural land, meanwhile, cost only 18 cents in services for every tax dollar returned.

In other words, farmland was profitable and development wasn't. Fortified by the economics, Dunn settled on a new technique used in the more crowded coastal regions of the country: Instead of buying land outright, it would buy the development rights.

When you own land, you could describe rights to that property as a bundle of rights. Selling off the individual sticks in that bundle is relatively common: You can sell the rights for timber, water, minerals—even for mineral exploration. If a farmer sells the development rights on a piece of his land, he still owns the land and can continue farming, and can sell or pass the land on—with the development restriction intact—to heirs. Also known as a conservation easement, the development rights value is figured by subtracting the value of the land for farming from its value for development.

The same principle governs a state law that taxes agricultural land at farm value, not subdivision value. The idea is the same—don't let rising land costs force farmers out of business—but conservation easements are a more permanent fix.

While conservation easements sound like a cure-all to development battles because they provide market value and preservation, Dunn's current town chair, Ed Minihan, says there will never be enough money to make everybody happy. The purchase of development rights must be used strategically. "It's just the tool," he says. "You have to put it in the context of an overall land-use plan."

For example, prime farmland might be a stronger candidate for protection than a rocky hillside, and a site with Indian mounds might be worth more than one without them. It all depends on protection goals. Used correctly, easements can even block annexations, says Minihan, since developments must be contiguous for annexation to occur. "If the city of Stoughton wanted to annex an 80-acre cornfield, fine, we don't care, but if we own the development rights, it will remain forever a cornfield. It's kind of a medieval approach, but it beats building a wall, and it preserves farmland."

Purchasing development rights is a complicated process, and therefore can be a political minefield. Wary of these dangers, Dunn moved slowly, hiring a part-time liaison to facilitate discussion, and taking more than three years to gather information, inform the electorate and solicit input. The proposition to purchase development rights came to a vote during a year marked by an electoral revolt, but Dunn townspeople actually agreed to raise their taxes on a $100,000 home by $50 to pay for the program.

Town clerk Roz Gausman and husband Bill received one acre of his family's Dunn farm as a wedding gift in 1970. Today they work 222 acres, grazing their 110 cows on 90 acres to preserve the soil.

Even before Dunn could decide how to proceed, opportunity knocked. The Dane County Natural Heritage Foundation had purchased a 90-day option to structure a successful transaction on a 240-acre farm that straddled the boundaries of Dunn, Madison and Blooming Grove. The county wanted part of the land for a park, and the foundation wanted Dunn to buy the development rights on the 172 acres within its borders. The deal was a perfect, if hasty, match: For $248,900 it preserved a large chunk of prime farmland next to a future park and along the town's border. The farmland itself will be sold to a local farmer in search of reason-

Continued on page 58

DUNN *Continued from page 29*

ably priced land. The deal—the first of its kind in Wisconsin—was closed on April 22, Earth Day 1997.

"There's no other place in the state where this could have happened," says Ruth Oppedahl, program director of the Heritage Foundation. "We could have sold the land to any farmer for the full farmland value, but there wouldn't have been any promise in the future that this would be permanently restricted open space."

In this age of cynicism about government, it's hard to believe that a document as simple as a town plan could so transform a community. But planning is more than just zoning and sewer districts—it's about visions and dreams.

The people of Dunn owe much of their sense of community to the hard process of planning, says Roz Gausman. "It drew people together for a cause, the grassroots who cared about the future of the town. I met so many more people from the town that I never would have met, had it not been through the land-use planning and the politics of a mutual goal of trying to preserve the town. I think it gave the town identity."

> "Where town governments get into trouble is that they start thinking like developers."

That cohesion was tested early on, in 1982, when Dane County chose a site on the western shore of Lake Waubesa for a new municipal landfill. Townsfolk successfully defeated that bid, only to have a private corporation revive the plan in 1985. It took nine years, $425,000, and a trip to the state Supreme Court to finally kill the plan. Dunn's share of the legal fees was $150,000; a lot of money for a small town. Though stopping the dump mainly benefited residents in just one corner of the town, Gausman says, "Everybody realized that it could happen to them the next time, so we have to fight this as a community."

Indeed, Minihan says the biggest battle Dunn faces is simply defining itself as a town. Kids in Dunn feed three different school districts, and there is no town center, unless you count the lonely town hall, its handful of shade trees, and the maintenance garage. "The downward spiral that happens to towns that are on the periphery of rapidly growing places is that people who move into those towns don't know that they're living in a town," says Minihan.

"We're dealing with a community in the broadest sense: the flora, the fauna, the people there," says Minihan, almost righteous in his sense of responsibility. "Where town governments get into trouble is that they start thinking like developers. I'm not against developers, but that's business. If [towns] get into the development business they've given up their community function." Planning is what people do when they go to school or take up a career, he argues, and communities should do the same. "There are things that we're going to need for the future. It makes imminent sense to have some idea of what our future is going to be, and if we can have some impact on that it would seem the wise thing to do."

What's more, town government is uniquely suited to handle the intricacies of planning and purchase of development rights. These issues are too complicated for the kind of sound-bite discussion that surrounds most politics on a state and national level. But town meetings "make sure you're in full contact with the citizens," says Minihan.

While Dunn has been a leader, it is inevitable that other towns will get more involved in the land-use battles brewing statewide—if only because the state's 1,266 towns are where most of the land is. Minihan has been talking up Dunn's achievements in high-growth areas around the state, including towns in Jefferson, Door and St. Croix counties. Planning is also climbing onto the radar screens of state government, entangling a variety of state agencies, and leading Gov. Tommy Thompson to appoint a special council to look into the matter. Statewide action may be only a year or two away.

"We think it's important that towns be active in it and protect themselves," says Rick Stadelman, executive director of the Wisconsin Towns Association. Stadelman echoes the sentiment that town government is a natural fit with good planning. "The President has town meetings, [U.S. Sen.] Feingold runs around the state and has town meetings, public broadcasting did theirs; it's the theory that town meetings are more democratic. We believe very strongly that you need to develop land-use planning based on as much citizen participation as possible. It's people that are doing it to themselves, rather than having someone from afar or up above telling every parcel owner what they can do. The people will be developing the plan themselves; everybody will have a stake in it."

Cal DeWitt's house in Dunn overlooks a splendid stretch of the Waubesa Wetlands, fed by swirling, sand-bottomed springs, and guarded by squadrons of iridescent dragonflies and a flotilla of big fish roiling the muck. He brings his university classes out to study the web of water and decay, and talks about it often. I don't think I've seen a finer marsh, and yet for DeWitt, it is the town's cemetery that provides the final proof that Dunn is a community reborn.

The Dunn Burying Ground is the final resting place for a few Civil War soldiers and other early townsfolk, but burials there ceased when it filled toward the end of the last century. A few townspeople decided it would be nice to expand and reopen the cemetery. When they brought their proposal to the annual town meeting a few years back, a new resident strongly objected to spending tax dollars on the project. "He concluded by saying no one would want to be buried in such a godforsaken place," recalls DeWitt. When Minihan took a straw vote of the 60-odd people present, asking who would like to buried in the town, "Everyone raised their hands except for this person," says DeWitt.

His voice catches a bit as he talks; a new cemetery means burying old friends. But DeWitt is happy nonetheless. "We had come into such an itinerant society that nobody had to be buried in the town of Dunn since the late 1800s because it really wasn't that much of a home. Through learning who we were and what our land was we discovered now that we were home, and we wanted to stay there even after death."

Erik Ness wrote "Wily Coyote" in the October issue.