

# Policies and Criteria for Environmental Corridors

## Dane County Water Quality Plan

Capital Area Regional Planning Commission

(DRAFT April 1, 2026)

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### SECTION 1 GENERAL

As defined in the [Dane County Water Quality Plan \(DCWQP\)](#), **Environmental Corridors** are a network of open space and natural areas in places that are otherwise urbanized or planned for urban development. These corridors include environmentally sensitive lands, natural and cultural resources requiring protection from disturbance and development, and lands needed for open space, stormwater management, and recreational use.

The [Environmental Corridors Report](#) identifies seven open space functions of Environmental Corridors: protection of resources and critical environmental processes; protection of public health, safety and property; outdoor recreation and education; scenic beauty; protection of archeological and geological resources; stormwater management; and climate resilience.

33 Pursuant to [Wis. Admin. Code § NR 121.05\(1\)\(g\)2.c.](#), certain lands must be excluded from development  
34 that requires waste treatment systems "because of the potential for adverse impacts on the quality of  
35 the waters of the state." The features to be considered for protection "include but are not limited to  
36 wetlands, shorelands, floodways and floodplains, steep slopes, highly erodible soils and other limiting  
37 soil types, groundwater recharge areas, and other such physical constraints." Environmental Corridors  
38 also connect and protect other features that advance local and regional interests, such as  
39 archeological sites, sensitive habitats, and public parks. The *Policies and Criteria for Environmental*  
40 *Corridors* (this document; hereinafter, these *Polices and Criteria*) sets requirements and guides the  
41 implementation of Environmental Corridors.

## 42 SECTION 2 DEFINITIONS

### 43 (i) High-Quality Woodlands

44 Woodlands that retain a high proportion of native vegetation, typically characterized by scattered,  
45 mature canopy trees. These systems maintain intact ecological structure and processes, support high  
46 levels of biodiversity, and exhibit largely undisturbed soil conditions, having avoided plowing, intensive  
47 grazing, and other forms of significant degradation.

### 48 (ii) Ordinary High Water Mark (OHWM)

49 As defined by WDNR<sup>1</sup>, the point on the bank or shore of a waterway up to which the presence and action  
50 of the water is so continuous as to leave a distinct mark either by erosion, destruction of terrestrial  
51 vegetation, or other easily recognized characteristics. In lieu of an available OHWM, the top of bank can  
52 be used for purposes of defining setbacks and Environmental Corridors.

### 53 (iii) Riparian

54 Describes the area along the edge of a water body (i.e., streams, lakes, ponds) or wetland that falls  
55 within the [vegetated buffer](#) required by these *Policies and Criteria*. If a [steep slope](#) or woodland starts  
56 within the riparian area and extends beyond it, the entirety of that feature is considered riparian,  
57 terminating either 300 feet from the water body or wetland edge or at the point where runoff no longer  
58 flows directly to that waterbody or wetland, whichever is less.

### 59 (iv) Sewer Service Areas (SSA)

60 Planning areas identified in the *DCWQP* which include existing sewer areas and adjacent land most  
61 suitable for new development, as well as environmentally sensitive areas where development would  
62 have an adverse impact upon water quality. In the Dane County region, sewer service areas have  
63 historically been further defined as either Urban Service Areas or Limited Service Areas.

### 64 (v) Steep Slopes

65 Slopes having a 12% or greater gradient in the glaciated portions of the county; or having a 20% or  
66 greater gradient in the driftless<sup>2</sup> portion of the county.

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<sup>1</sup> See WDNR [Navigability and Ordinary High Water Mark Determinations](#) webpage

<sup>2</sup> See WGNHS [Publications Catalog](#)

67 **(vi)Vegetated Buffer**  
68 A vegetated area along a wetland or water body that serves to protect water quality and other  
69 ecosystem processes by filtering pollutants, preferably containing native<sup>3</sup> vegetation appropriate for  
70 local conditions.

### 71 **SECTION 3 IMPLEMENTATION**

72 These *Policies and Criteria* apply to all sewer service areas identified in the *DCWQP*. Environmental  
73 Corridors are mapped for all sewer service areas within Dane County. Mapping is for visual reference  
74 only and may not reflect the most accurate information available; always consult with CARPC Staff for  
75 verification of accuracy of Environmental Corridor mapping.

76 Environmental Corridor boundaries are continually revised and updated based on best-available  
77 information. Review and adjustments typically occur during sewer service area amendments and sewer  
78 extension reviews, or at any other time with support of the local unit of government. Specific lands within  
79 a sewer service area which have been added through an amendment to the boundary may be subject  
80 to differing requirements that supersede these *Policies and Criteria*.

81 These *Policies and Criteria* set the regional expectations for lands to be protected from urban  
82 development. Local units of government are encouraged to use this land and water protection tool to  
83 address local priorities or resources not addressed by these *Policies and Criteria*. Areas not otherwise  
84 listed for inclusion in Environmental Corridor within Section 4 (see [Required Areas](#) and [Voluntary Areas](#)  
85 below) can be voluntarily proposed for inclusion with consideration to the three general criteria  
86 described in detail in the *Environmental Corridors Report*, which are: (a) degree of contribution of an  
87 element to an open space function; (b) degree of continuity, connectivity, and linkages; and (c) degree  
88 of existing development.

89  
90 Local units of government play an active role in the implementation and protection of Environmental  
91 Corridors by building protective measures into local ordinances, zoning requirements, plat design  
92 review, permitting, and conservation design requirements. These and other regulations, combined with  
93 acquisition techniques, help ensure the integrity of the corridors (see further discussion within Appendix  
94 C of the *Environmental Corridors Report*).

### 95 **SECTION 4 AREAS FOR INCLUSION**

96 Areas included in Environmental Corridors are classified into two categories: **required** areas and  
97 **voluntary** areas. Required areas are always included in Environmental Corridors, whereas voluntary  
98 areas are recommended for protection from development and will be included with support of the  
99 local/governing municipality.

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<sup>3</sup> Native species recommended by WDNR or best available data resources

100 a) Required Areas

- 101 1. Wetlands under WDNR jurisdiction along with a minimum 75-ft vegetated buffer from the
- 102 wetland edge on all sides (as determined by current<sup>4</sup> WDNR-recognized wetland delineation or
- 103 WDNR-mapped WWI wetlands where field delineation is not available)
- 104 2. Perennial<sup>5</sup> water bodies (including natural and constructed streams, lakes, ponds, etc.) along
- 105 with a minimum 75-ft vegetated buffer from the ordinary high water mark (OHWM) on all sides
- 106 3. Intermittent<sup>55</sup> streams (both natural and constructed, but generally excluding drainage
- 107 channels constructed as part of a stormwater management system) along with a vegetated
- 108 buffer that is at least 25 feet from the OHWM and falls within a larger vegetated corridor with a
- 109 minimum total width defined as follows (stream need not be centered within):
- 110 a. If desired to include public recreational path use: 100 ft
- 111 b. If not desired to include public recreational path use: 75 ft
- 112 4. Waters designated as Areas of Special Natural Resource Interest<sup>6</sup> by WDNR along with a
- 113 minimum vegetated buffer that is at least 75 feet from the OHWM on all sides and falls within a
- 114 minimum 200-ft total width vegetated corridor (water resource need not be centered within)
- 115 5. Stormwater management areas and conveyance channels (generally only engineered
- 116 practices containing open water and/or the use of soil and vegetation for treatment) within an
- 117 outlet, easement, or other defined boundary
- 118 6. 1% annual chance (100-year) floodplains and floodways
- 119 7. Riparian steep slopes
- 120 8. Publicly owned parks, greenways, and conservancy areas (including supporting structures and
- 121 other improvements necessary for the function of these areas)
- 122 9. Archaeological sites on the National Register or identified by Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS)

123 b) Voluntary Areas

- 124 1. Potentially restorable wetlands and areas of hydric soils
- 125 2. 0.2% annual chance (or 500-year) floodplains and floodways
- 126 3. Vegetated buffers for wetlands and other water bodies extending up to 300 feet from the
- 127 wetland edge or OHWM (based on the sensitivity of the resources and level of protection
- 128 desired)
- 129 4. Wooded, steep slopes
- 130 5. Ice Age Trail and Capital Springs Trail Corridors
- 131 6. Internally drained depressional areas (closed basins)
- 132 7. Natural Resource Area Boundaries<sup>7</sup>
- 133 8. Privately owned parks, greenways, and conservancy areas (including supporting structures and
- 134 other improvements necessary for the function of these areas)

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<sup>4</sup> Five years from the date of WDNR confirmation or date of delineation by a [WDNR-assured delineator](#)

<sup>5</sup> As determined by the [National Hydrography Dataset](#) from the United States Geological Survey; refined based on field assessment or better data (e.g., aerials, contours)

<sup>6</sup> See list of waters designated on WDNR [Water Quality Standards and Classifications](#) webpage

<sup>7</sup> Data source managed by Dane County Parks

- 135 9. Endangered and sensitive habitats<sup>8</sup> (based on consultation with WDNR or other qualified
- 136 personnel) including, but not limited to, remnant or restored prairies and oak savannas
- 137 10. Habitat stepping stones and corridor connections that support local ecological needs<sup>9</sup>
- 138 11. Areas containing subsurface conditions (such as liquified soils, high groundwater, shallow
- 139 porous bedrock, karst features, and known critical recharge areas with a direct conduit to
- 140 groundwater) where development risks groundwater contamination or alters groundwater flow
- 141 or downstream hydrology, unless stringent site plan review and appropriate mitigation
- 142 practices have been provided with the goal of maintaining groundwater protection
- 143 12. Unique geologic formations and glacial features (such as rock outcrops, eskers, outwash fans,
- 144 channels, moraine crests, and drumlins)
- 145 13. Riparian slopes between 12%-20% gradient in the driftless portion of the county, unless stringent
- 146 site plan review and appropriate mitigation practices have been provided with the goal of
- 147 maintaining the stability of the slope
- 148 14. Riparian wooded areas, in particular those that are high-quality woodlands

149 **SECTION 5 PERMITTED USES**

150 This section identifies specific features and activities, collectively referred to here as “uses,” that are

151 either prohibited because they are **incompatible** with the functions of Environmental Corridors or

152 permitted because they are considered **compatible** with these functions. The determination of

153 compatibility is made by CARPC staff based on these *Policies and Criteria* and the concepts and

154 principles described in the *Environmental Corridors Report*.

155 **a) Incompatible Uses**

156 The following uses are incompatible with Environmental Corridor functions and prohibited within

157 Environmental Corridors:

- 158 1. Impervious areas or other site development activity, unless otherwise exempted or allowed
- 159 as a compatible use
- 160 2. Soil disturbance within the following areas, often referred to as the “no-grading buffer,”
- 161 unless intended to reestablish natural grades, to restore wetland or riparian habitat, or
- 162 when the grading is necessarily associated with a compatible use and the area is restored
- 163 to existing (or better) conditions utilizing native vegetation:
- 164 a. Within 30 ft of a wetland edge
- 165 b. Within 30 ft of the OHWM of a water body or within the minimum-required
- 166 vegetated buffer, whichever is less
- 167 3. Storage of materials (e.g., contaminated waste products, agricultural chemicals, industrial
- 168 chemicals, petroleum products, etc.), equipment (e.g., diesel generators, fueling stations,
- 169 etc.) or other activities with the potential to contaminate surface water or groundwater

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<sup>8</sup> Based on an assessment by a professional using available DNR coarse-level metric protocols for [oak openings](#), [oak and pine barrens](#), [oak woodlands](#), and [southern sedge meadow and wet-mesic prairie](#) community types

<sup>9</sup> See Chapter 03 of the [Environmental Corridors Report](#)

170 **b) Compatible Uses**

171 The following uses are generally compatible with Environmental Corridor functions and may be  
172 permitted within Environmental Corridors. However, these uses should remain outside of applicable no-  
173 grading buffers unless the use results in no changes in grade and only temporary impacts to the  
174 Environmental Corridor due to construction, and any temporary disturbance is fully restored to existing  
175 (or better) conditions utilizing native vegetation appropriate for the conditions (insofar as allowed by  
176 other state and local requirements):

- 177 1. Recreation-related facilities (e.g., park shelters or facilities, bike/pedestrian paths,  
178 necessary parking and drives to service allowed facilities, etc.)
- 179 2. Stormwater management practices
- 180 3. Utility maintenance or construction (public or private) that cannot reasonably occur  
181 outside of the Environmental Corridor and that meets the criteria of [Wis. Admin. Code § NR](#)  
182 [115](#) for the purpose of serving eligible development
- 183 4. Agricultural land uses that adhere to conservation best management practices (also  
184 referred to as sustainable or regenerative agriculture) and which build soil health, retain  
185 water and nutrients, and provide water quality benefits
- 186 5. Temporary storage of construction materials for staging that do not have the potential to  
187 contaminate surface water or groundwater

188 Grading, vegetation modification, or the installation of compatible uses in an Environmental Corridor  
189 associated with environmentally sensitive areas should not appreciably reduce or harm the ecological  
190 functions of the Environmental Corridor (e.g., disturbed areas shall be restored with native vegetation;  
191 facilities should be located so as to minimize the potential impacts on resources present).

192 **SECTION 6 EXEMPTIONS**

193 The following do not necessitate inclusion within Environmental Corridor and are exempt from the  
194 *Policies and Criteria*:

- 195 a) Impervious areas (footprint only) that existed prior to February 28, 2008 (date of original  
196 adoption of these *Policies and Criteria*)
- 197 b) Constructed riparian steep slopes beyond minimum-required vegetated buffers for water  
198 bodies and wetlands
- 199 c) Wetlands (or portions thereof) and associated vegetated buffers that have received an  
200 artificial or nonfederal exemption or fill permit from the WDNR
- 201 d) Wetlands (and associated vegetated buffers) which have formed within constructed  
202 drainage swales as part of a stormwater management plan or in roadside ditches as part  
203 of transportation projects
- 204 e) Transportation maintenance or construction (public or private) that cannot reasonably  
205 occur outside the required Environmental Corridor area and that meets the criteria of [Wis.](#)  
206 [Admin. Code § NR 117](#) for the purpose of serving eligible development

207 **SECTION 7 CHANGES TO ENVIRONMENTAL CORRIDORS**

208 After specific lands have been designated as Environmental Corridor, subsequent changes are possible  
209 through the following two processes: **major changes** and **administrative changes**<sup>10</sup>. The determination  
210 of which process a change must follow is made by CARPC staff using these guidelines; uncertainty  
211 about the water quality impacts of a proposed change will typically trigger the major change process.

212 **a) Major Changes**

213 **Major changes** have the potential for significant adverse impacts to water quality or other protected  
214 resources defined by these *Policies and Criteria*. These changes constitute a formal amendment to the  
215 *DCWQP*, and require a public hearing, action by the CARPC Commission, and WDNR approval following a  
216 detailed analysis of the impact of the change to demonstrate that what is proposed will still maintain  
217 water quality standards and contribute to open space functions and that the proposed mitigation  
218 measures will likely be successful in mitigating potential adverse impacts. Major change requests must  
219 be initiated or supported by the municipality that governs the area in question. Major changes include,  
220 but are not limited to, the following:

- 221 1. Removal of, or development within, a required Environmental Corridor area as defined in  
222 these *Policies and Criteria*
- 223 2. Any change resulting in the elimination or interruption of the continuity of any corridor  
224 segment that includes environmentally sensitive areas
- 225 3. Any change inconsistent with the conditions of a Resolution or Water Quality Management  
226 Letter associated with an approved amendment to the sewer service area

227 **b) Administrative Changes**

228 **Administrative changes** do not have the potential for significant adverse impacts to water quality or  
229 other protected resources defined by these *Policies and Criteria* and are administered by CARPC staff.  
230 Administrative changes include, but are not limited to, the following:

- 231 1. Revisions based on new data (recognized as valid by WDNR) regarding the location, extent,  
232 or type of natural feature described as a required Environmental Corridor area
- 233 2. Revisions to reflect municipally approved changes in the location or extent of parks,  
234 greenways, conservancy areas, or stormwater management areas
- 235 3. Removal of areas that are not required Environmental Corridors
- 236 4. Addition of areas described in the [Required Areas](#) or [Voluntary Areas](#) sections of these  
237 *Policies and Criteria* or determined by CARPC staff to be compatible with the three general  
238 criteria for inclusion described in the *Environmental Corridors Report*
- 239 5. Revisions resulting from application of exemptions described in [Section 6](#) (above)

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<sup>10</sup> Referred to as 'Minor changes' in original *Policies and Criteria of Environmental Corridors*