

# Policies and Criteria for Environmental Corridors

## Dane County Water Quality Plan

### Capital Area Regional Planning Commission

(DRAFT June 2, 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.

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

## SECTION 2 DEFINITIONS

### **(i) Constructed Drainageway**

A watercourse constructed to carry water flows typically characterized by a clearly defined channel bottom with a consistent slope and uniform side slopes; for the purposes of these *Policies and Criteria*, a naturally occurring watercourse which has been altered is not included in this definition and would retain its original stream classification (i.e., perennial, intermittent, or ephemeral).

### **(ii) Ephemeral Stream**

A stream with flow only in response to precipitation events (rainfall or snowmelt) and typically characterized by a lack of features found in perennial and intermittent streams and having physical characteristics more closely matching the surrounding upland landscape.

### **(iii) High-Quality Woodlands**

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

### **(iv) Intermittent Stream**

A stream with seasonal flow (i.e., water flows continuously during wetter parts of the year but is typically dry during drier parts of the year) with flow sourced from continual precipitation patterns (rainfall or snowmelt) and upstream flows or when groundwater is sufficiently high to provide base flow and typically characterized by a well-defined channel often containing riffles/pools, evidence of ongoing scour such as exposure of rock, gravel, or sand in the channel bottom, and likely hydric soils. Presence of aquatic species would indicate it is an intermittent or perennial stream.

### **(v) Ordinary High Water Mark (OHWM)**

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

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

**(vi) Perennial Stream**

A stream with continuous year-round flow in at least a portion of the streambed, under normal climactic conditions, with flow sourced from upstream waters and/or base flow (groundwater discharge into the stream) and typically characterized by a well-defined channel often containing riffles/pools, and with a clear distinction between limits of water flow and vegetation growth.

**(vii) Riparian**

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

**(viii) Sewer Service Areas (SSA)**

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

**(ix) Steep Slopes**

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

**(x) Vegetated Buffer**

A vegetated area along a wetland or water body that serves to protect water quality and other ecosystem processes by filtering pollutants, preferably containing native<sup>3</sup> vegetation appropriate for local conditions.

## SECTION 3 IMPLEMENTATION

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

Environmental Corridor boundaries are continually revised and updated by CARPC staff based on best-available information. Review and adjustments typically occur during sewer service area amendments and sewer extension reviews, or at any other time with support of the local unit of government. Specific lands within a sewer service area (SSA) may be subject to differing requirements identified within the approval of that SSA amendment area which supersede these *Policies and Criteria*.

These *Policies and Criteria* set the regional expectations for lands to be protected from urban development. Local units of government are encouraged to use this land and water protection tool to

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

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

address local priorities or resources not addressed by these *Policies and Criteria*. Areas not otherwise listed for inclusion in Environmental Corridor within Section 4 (see [Required Areas](#) and [Voluntary Areas](#) below) can be voluntarily proposed for inclusion with consideration to the three general criteria described in detail in the *Environmental Corridors Report*, which are: (a) degree of contribution of an element to an open space function; (b) degree of continuity, connectivity, and linkages; and (c) degree of existing development.

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

## SECTION 4 AREAS FOR INCLUSION

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

### a) Required Areas

1. Wetlands under WDNR jurisdiction along with a minimum 75-ft vegetated buffer from the wetland edge on all sides (as determined by current<sup>4</sup> WDNR-recognized wetland delineation or WDNR-mapped WWI wetlands where field delineation is not available)
2. Perennial<sup>5</sup> water bodies (including natural streams, lakes, ponds, etc.) along with a minimum 75-ft vegetated buffer from the ordinary high water mark (OHWM) on all sides
3. Intermittent<sup>5</sup> streams along with a vegetated buffer that is at least 25 feet from the OHWM and falls within a larger vegetated corridor with a minimum total width defined as follows (stream need not be centered within):
  - a. If desired to include public recreational path use: 100 ft
  - b. If not desired to include public recreational path use: 75 ft
4. Waters designated as Areas of Special Natural Resource Interest<sup>6</sup> by WDNR along with a minimum vegetated buffer that is at least 75 feet from the OHWM on all sides and with a minimum 200-ft total width vegetated corridor (water resource need not be centered within)
5. Stormwater management areas and conveyance channels (generally only engineered practices containing open water and/or the use of soil and vegetation for treatment) within an outlet, easement, or other defined boundary
6. 1% annual chance (100-year) floodplains and floodways

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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> Stream classification and extent will be preliminarily identified by the [National Hydrography Dataset](#) from the United States Geological Survey and refined or adjusted by CARPC staff based on field assessment or better data (e.g., imagery, topographic information, weather data, aquatic plant survey, aquatic macroinvertebrates survey, etc.)

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

7. Riparian steep slopes
8. Publicly owned parks, greenways, and conservancy areas (including supporting structures and other improvements necessary for the function of these areas)
9. Archaeological sites on the National Register or identified by Wisconsin Historical Society

## b) Voluntary Areas

1. Potentially restorable wetlands and areas of hydric soils
2. 0.2% annual chance (or 500-year) floodplains and floodways
3. Vegetated buffers for wetlands and other water bodies extending up to 300 feet from the wetland edge or OHWM (based on the sensitivity of the resources and level of protection desired)
4. Wooded, steep slopes
5. Ice Age Trail and Capital Springs Trail Corridors
6. Internally drained depressional areas (closed basins)
7. Natural Resource Area Boundaries<sup>7</sup>
8. Privately owned parks, greenways, and conservancy areas (including supporting structures and other improvements necessary for the function of these areas)
9. Endangered and sensitive habitats<sup>8</sup> (based on consultation with WDNR or other qualified personnel) including, but not limited to, remnant or restored prairies and oak savannas
10. Habitat stepping stones and corridor connections that support local ecological needs<sup>9</sup>
11. Areas containing subsurface conditions (such as liquified soils, high groundwater, shallow porous bedrock, karst features, and known critical recharge areas with a direct conduit to groundwater) where development risks groundwater contamination or alters groundwater flow or downstream hydrology, unless stringent site plan review and appropriate mitigation practices have been provided with the goal of maintaining groundwater protection
12. Unique geologic formations and glacial features (such as rock outcrops, eskers, outwash fans, channels, moraine crests, and drumlins)
13. Riparian slopes between 12%-20% gradient in the driftless portion of the county, unless stringent site plan review and appropriate mitigation practices have been provided with the goal of maintaining the stability of the slope
14. Riparian wooded areas, in particular those that contain high-quality woodlands

## SECTION 5 PERMITTED USES

This section identifies specific features and activities, collectively referred to here as “uses,” that are either prohibited because they are **incompatible** with the functions of Environmental Corridors or permitted because they are considered **compatible** with these functions. The determination of compatibility is made by CARPC staff based on these *Policies and Criteria* and the concepts and principles described in the *Environmental Corridors Report*.

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

<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](#)

## a) Incompatible Uses

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

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

## b) Compatible Uses

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

1. Recreation-related facilities (e.g., park shelters or facilities, bike/pedestrian paths, boat ramps, necessary parking and drives to service allowed facilities, etc.)
2. Stormwater management practices
3. Utility maintenance or construction (public or private) that cannot reasonably occur outside of the Environmental Corridor and that meets the criteria of [Wis. Admin. Code § NR 115](#) for the purpose of serving eligible development
4. Agricultural land uses that adhere to conservation best management practices (also referred to as sustainable or regenerative agriculture) and which build soil health, retain water and nutrients, and provide water quality benefits
5. Temporary<sup>10</sup> storage of construction materials for staging and other activities that do not have the potential to contaminate surface water or groundwater

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

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<sup>10</sup> The length of time determined to be temporary shall be made by CARPC staff in consultation with other officials having jurisdiction and shall be made in the interest of protecting water quality and the functions of the environmental corridor

## SECTION 6 EXEMPTIONS

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

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

## SECTION 7 CHANGES TO ENVIRONMENTAL CORRIDORS

After specific lands have been designated as Environmental Corridor, subsequent changes are possible through the following two processes: **major changes** and **administrative changes**<sup>11</sup>. The determination of which process a change must follow is made by CARPC staff using these guidelines; uncertainty about the water quality impacts of a proposed change will typically trigger the major change process.

### a) Major Changes

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

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

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<sup>11</sup> Referred to as 'Minor changes' in original *Policies and Criteria of Environmental Corridors*

## b) Administrative Changes

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

1. Revisions based on new information regarding the location, extent, or type of natural feature described as a required Environmental Corridor area, where the change to the underlying feature is recognized as valid by WDNR or FEMA (e.g., assured wetland delineation, permitting, Letter of Map Changes, etc.)
2. Revisions regarding the location or extent of intermittent streams, where supported by field assessment or other site-specific data, or where an engineered solution will be implemented to handle existing flows and meet current best practices for stormwater management and erosion control, including all other local regulations
3. Revisions to reflect municipally approved changes in the location or extent of parks, greenways, conservancy areas, or stormwater management areas
4. Removal of areas that are not required for inclusion in Environmental Corridors by these *Policies and Criteria* or as a condition of approval of an applicable SSA amendment
5. Addition of areas described in the [Required Areas](#) or [Voluntary Areas](#) sections of these *Policies and Criteria*
6. Addition of areas determined by CARPC staff to be compatible with the general criteria for inclusion described in the *Environmental Corridors Report* (also see Section 3)
7. Revisions resulting from application of exemptions described in [Section 6](#) (above)