

# Policies and Criteria for Environmental Corridors

## Dane County Water Quality Plan

*Capital Area Regional Planning Commission*

*(DRAFT April 10, 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) **Constructed Drainageway**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

65 As defined by WDNR<sup>1</sup>, the point on the bank or shore of a waterway up to which the presence and action  
66 of the water is so continuous as to leave a distinct mark either by erosion, destruction of terrestrial  
67 vegetation, or other easily recognized characteristics. In lieu of an available OHWM, the top of bank can  
68 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

69 **(vi) Perennial Stream**

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

74 **(vii) Riparian**

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

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

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

85 **(ix) Steep Slopes**

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

88 **(x) Vegetated Buffer**

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

92 **SECTION 3 IMPLEMENTATION**

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

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

102 These *Policies and Criteria* set the regional expectations for lands to be protected from urban  
103 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

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

110  
111 Local units of government play an active role in the implementation and protection of Environmental  
112 Corridors by building protective measures into local ordinances, zoning requirements, plat design  
113 review, permitting, and conservation design requirements. These and other regulations, combined with  
114 acquisition techniques, help ensure the integrity of the corridors (see further discussion within Appendix  
115 C of the *Environmental Corridors Report*).

## 116 SECTION 4 AREAS FOR INCLUSION

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

### 121 a) Required Areas

- 122 1. Wetlands under WDNR jurisdiction along with a minimum 75-ft vegetated buffer from the  
123 wetland edge on all sides (as determined by current<sup>4</sup> WDNR-recognized wetland delineation or  
124 WDNR-mapped WWI wetlands where field delineation is not available)
- 125 2. Perennial<sup>5</sup> water bodies (including natural streams, lakes, ponds, etc.) along with a minimum  
126 75-ft vegetated buffer from the ordinary high water mark (OHWM) on all sides
- 127 3. Intermittent<sup>55</sup> streams along with a vegetated buffer that is at least 25 feet from the OHWM and  
128 falls within a larger vegetated corridor with a minimum total width defined as follows (stream  
129 need not be centered within):
  - 130 a. If desired to include public recreational path use: 100 ft
  - 131 b. If not desired to include public recreational path use: 75 ft
- 132 4. Waters designated as Areas of Special Natural Resource Interest<sup>6</sup> by WDNR along with a  
133 minimum vegetated buffer that is at least 75 feet from the OHWM on all sides and with a  
134 minimum 200-ft total width vegetated corridor (water resource need not be centered within)
- 135 5. Stormwater management areas and conveyance channels (generally only engineered  
136 practices containing open water and/or the use of soil and vegetation for treatment) within an  
137 outlet, easement, or other defined boundary
- 138 6. 1% annual chance (100-year) floodplains and floodways
- 139 7. Riparian steep slopes

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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

- 140 8. Publicly owned parks, greenways, and conservancy areas (including supporting structures and
- 141 other improvements necessary for the function of these areas)
- 142 9. Archaeological sites on the National Register or identified by Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS)

143 **b) Voluntary Areas**

- 144 1. Potentially restorable wetlands and areas of hydric soils
- 145 2. 0.2% annual chance (or 500-year) floodplains and floodways
- 146 3. Vegetated buffers for wetlands and other water bodies extending up to 300 feet from the
- 147 wetland edge or OHWM (based on the sensitivity of the resources and level of protection
- 148 desired)
- 149 4. Wooded, steep slopes
- 150 5. Ice Age Trail and Capital Springs Trail Corridors
- 151 6. Internally drained depressional areas (closed basins)
- 152 7. Natural Resource Area Boundaries<sup>7</sup>
- 153 8. Privately owned parks, greenways, and conservancy areas (including supporting structures and
- 154 other improvements necessary for the function of these areas)
- 155 9. Endangered and sensitive habitats<sup>8</sup> (based on consultation with WDNR or other qualified
- 156 personnel) including, but not limited to, remnant or restored prairies and oak savannas
- 157 10. Habitat stepping stones and corridor connections that support local ecological needs<sup>9</sup>
- 158 11. Areas containing subsurface conditions (such as liquified soils, high groundwater, shallow
- 159 porous bedrock, karst features, and known critical recharge areas with a direct conduit to
- 160 groundwater) where development risks groundwater contamination or alters groundwater flow
- 161 or downstream hydrology, unless stringent site plan review and appropriate mitigation
- 162 practices have been provided with the goal of maintaining groundwater protection
- 163 12. Unique geologic formations and glacial features (such as rock outcrops, eskers, outwash fans,
- 164 channels, moraine crests, and drumlins)
- 165 13. Riparian slopes between 12%-20% gradient in the driftless portion of the county, unless stringent
- 166 site plan review and appropriate mitigation practices have been provided with the goal of
- 167 maintaining the stability of the slope
- 168 14. Riparian wooded areas, in particular those that contain high-quality woodlands

169 **SECTION 5 PERMITTED USES**

170 This section identifies specific features and activities, collectively referred to here as “uses,” that are  
 171 either prohibited because they are **incompatible** with the functions of Environmental Corridors or  
 172 permitted because they are considered **compatible** with these functions. The determination of  
 173 compatibility is made by CARPC staff based on these *Policies and Criteria* and the concepts and  
 174 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](#)

175 **a) Incompatible Uses**

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

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

190 **b) Compatible Uses**

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

- 197 1. Recreation-related facilities (e.g., park shelters or facilities, bike/pedestrian paths, boat  
198 ramps, necessary parking and drives to service allowed facilities, etc.)
- 199 2. Stormwater management practices
- 200 3. Utility maintenance or construction (public or private) that cannot reasonably occur  
201 outside of the Environmental Corridor and that meets the criteria of [Wis. Admin. Code § NR](#)  
202 [115](#) for the purpose of serving eligible development
- 203 4. Agricultural land uses that adhere to conservation best management practices (also  
204 referred to as sustainable or regenerative agriculture) and which build soil health, retain  
205 water and nutrients, and provide water quality benefits
- 206 5. Temporary<sup>10</sup> storage of construction materials for staging and other activities that do not  
207 have the potential to contaminate surface water or groundwater

208 Grading, vegetation modification, or the installation of compatible uses in an Environmental Corridor  
209 associated with environmentally sensitive areas should not appreciably reduce or harm the ecological  
210 functions of the Environmental Corridor (e.g., disturbed areas shall be restored with native vegetation;  
211 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.

212 **SECTION 6 EXEMPTIONS**

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

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

227 **SECTION 7 CHANGES TO ENVIRONMENTAL CORRIDORS**

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

232 **a) Major Changes**

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

- 241 1. Removal of, or development within, a required Environmental Corridor area as defined in  
242 these *Policies and Criteria*
- 243 2. Any change resulting in the elimination or interruption of the continuity of any corridor  
244 segment that includes environmentally sensitive areas
- 245 3. Any change inconsistent with the conditions of a Resolution or Water Quality Management  
246 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*

247 **b) Administrative Changes**

248 **Administrative changes** do not have the potential for significant adverse impacts to water quality or  
249 other protected resources defined by these *Policies and Criteria* and are administered by CARPC staff.

250 Administrative changes include, but are not limited to, the following:

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