

I n t r o d u c t i o n

The Value of a Comprehensive Plan

When we think of places we have visited or lived, some stand out as models of natural beauty and human comfort, supported by thriving local economies. The most satisfying places to live, work, and raise families are communities that meet the needs of commerce and individual expression while protecting and conserving the natural environment and non-renewable resources.

“Ideal” communities do not grow by accident or without public debate and agreed-upon guidelines. Collaborative planning processes and comprehensive plans are the building blocks of such great communities.

Planning helps maintain and promote livable, vital communities. Local municipalities play a key role by developing and implementing comprehensive plans that reflect their own goals. The County Comprehensive Plan provides an opportunity to coordinate these efforts and create a shared community vision.

The content of the Plan was developed from issues citizens identified as critical. It describes existing conditions, identifies strengths and weaknesses, and outlines strategies that can inform decision-makers at all levels of government, as well as individuals, businesses, educational institutions, and not-for-profit organizations as they plan for the future of Tompkins County.

Regional Cooperation

A key theme in this Comprehensive Plan is the interrelationship among the various aspects of our daily lives: housing, transportation, jobs, the environment, and neighborhoods and communities. These interrelationships often extend well beyond county lines and are regional in nature. Tompkins County is part of a broader geographic area and economic market that influences everything from where we choose to shop and live to what areas we visit to hike and swim. An over-arching principle of the Plan is that Tompkins County will work proactively with towns,

villages, the City of Ithaca, adjoining counties, and state and federal agencies to cooperatively address regional issues, such as natural resources, public infrastructure, and consumer, employment, and housing markets.

The Plan outlines ways the community can address regional and intermunicipal issues that may or may not be included in local planning efforts. Often, local municipalities have a full workload simply addressing the important day-to-day issues of local concern. Regional planning can help municipal governments address key issues of concern, such as sprawl, economic development, housing affordability, and environmental protection. It can also help residents of rural and urban areas to recognize their inter-connectedness and issues of mutual interest.

New York State clearly places land use authority in the hands of its towns, villages, and cities. The State also specifically recognizes that intermunicipal planning is needed to cooperatively address regional issues. To this end, the State encourages the development of county comprehensive plans to address development and preservation issues that transcend local political boundaries.

Listening to Community Voices

The Tompkins County Charter calls for the preparation of a comprehensive plan for the development of the County. The groundwork for the Comprehensive Plan started in 2001 with the County Planning Department’s Vital Communities Initiative, a two-year effort to fully involve the community in defining a broad vision of how, where, and what kind of development should occur in the future. The impetus for the Initiative came from concerns expressed by local organizations, national awareness of the need to combat sprawl and improve communities, and recognition of the need to improve the quality of life for the county’s citizens.

The intent of the Vital Communities Initiative was to recognize the diversity of communities, lifestyles,

and interests in our county and beyond, and to provide citizens and community leaders with a planning process to articulate their vision for the future. Through participatory workshops and public presentations, a set of interim development and preservation principles was developed. These interim principles were adopted by the County Legislature in 2002.

The next step was to develop the purpose statement and determine the content of the Comprehensive Plan. In the winter of 2002-2003, Planning Department staff gave presentations and gathered input at five meetings for the general public and ten for community groups. Over 45 potential plan elements were identified. Rating criteria were then used by the Planning Advisory Board to set priorities among the issues to determine which to include in the Comprehensive Plan. Issues ranked highly if they were important to large numbers of county residents, impacted wide geographic areas of the county, and could be addressed in meaningful ways through a countywide approach. In addition, the Plan is intended to primarily address the physical development of the county, rather than all facets of life in Tompkins County. Several noteworthy issues were not included for study in the Plan, due in part, to time and staff constraints. Such issues include energy, air quality, local school districts, historic and archeological resources, scenic resources, outdoor recreation, public safety, and health and human services. In the summer and fall of 2003, staff reviewed existing documents and researched and analyzed the various issues included in the Plan. With input and assistance from the community representatives on the Planning Advisory Board, the Plan was drafted in early 2004.

In April 2004, the Draft Comprehensive Plan was printed, distributed, and posted on the County Planning Department's website in order to elicit public comment and feedback. Staff presented the key components and findings of the Plan at 17 community group and advisory board meetings, and 14 open houses and public meetings in all municipalities in the county. Informational displays were set-up at 19 locations, including libraries, banks, senior centers, and community halls. All comments were gathered and reviewed (see Appendix: Summary of Public Outreach and Public Comments Received), and key action items identified for inclusion in the final Plan.

During the summer and fall of 2004, staff revised the text, tables, and maps in the Plan based on public comment; developed future development scenarios to evaluate the impact of implementing the Plan; worked with professional consultants to prepare a fiscal impact analysis of the recommendations in the Plan; and created an implementation strategy for the key action items.

Coordinating with Other Efforts

Development of the Comprehensive Plan included review of more than 70 existing plans of local municipalities, adjoining counties, and State agencies, as well as meetings with representatives of relevant governments and public agencies to discuss regional planning issues. The County's Plan seeks to build on and coordinate recommendations from a variety of functional plans developed on the county and regional level to address economic, transportation, and natural resources issues.

Two plans in particular, the Tompkins County Economic Development Strategy and the Ithaca-Tompkins County Transportation Council Long Range Transportation Plan, were being updated while this Plan was being drafted and whenever appropriate, the goals and actions identified in those plans were incorporated into this Comprehensive Plan. Among the other plans reviewed are the following:

- Tompkins County Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan
- Better Housing for Tompkins County Strategic Plan
- Cayuga Lake Waterfront Plan
- Cayuga Lake Watershed Restoration and Protection Plan
- Tompkins County Agricultural Lands and Natural Areas Preservation Feasibility Study
- Building Greenways for Tompkins County

In addition to reviewing plans, Planning Department staff met with adjoining county planning directors and regional planners from the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation to discuss issues of mutual interest. The major issues raised were commuter transportation, development pressure in areas just beyond Tompkins County's borders, farmland protection, tourism development, and management of public park and recreation areas.

The Plan seeks to build on and coordinate a variety of existing plans.

PRINCIPLES OF THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

The Comprehensive Plan is organized around ten basic interlocking principles. The principles incorporate elements of the Vital Communities Initiative, adhere to the values expressed in Tompkins County's mission and vision statements, and reflect the wisdom gathered from many community opinions.

Corresponding to these principles are various policies and action items. Policies are the long-term goals of the Plan and provide a framework to guide future decision-making. Action items are specific short-term activities to be undertaken to implement the policies. Policies and action items are shown in each section of the Plan.

The principles, which fall under four broad headings, are shown here:

REGIONAL COOPERATION

- Tompkins County will work proactively with towns, villages, the City of Ithaca, adjoining counties, and state and federal agencies to cooperatively address regional issues, such as natural resources, public infrastructure, and consumer, employment, and housing markets.

HOUSING, TRANSPORTATION, AND JOBS

- Housing in Tompkins County should be affordable and appealing to all residents, regardless of their income or whether they rent or own their homes.
- The efficiency of the highway system should be enhanced and use of public transit, walking, and bicycling should be increased.
- The local economy should be enhanced by building on important community assets, such as a highly educated workforce, an entrepreneurial spirit, dynamic academic institutions, and a high quality of life.
- A diversified rural economy centered around the working rural landscapes of farms and forests, and the livelihoods of those who depend upon them, should be preserved and enhanced.

THE ENVIRONMENT

- Water resources provide drinking water, recreational opportunities, and environmental benefits, and should be protected and used appropriately.
- Natural features that define our community, and form the foundation of our local and regional ecological systems, should be preserved and enhanced.

NEIGHBORHOODS AND COMMUNITIES

- Tompkins County residents should be safe, healthy, and comfortable with the aesthetics of their communities, and have daily opportunities to interact with neighbors and community members to build strong, cohesive communities.
- The development patterns reflected in the existing villages, hamlets, and the City of Ithaca's downtown area and neighborhoods should be promoted as key components of the built environment that greatly contribute to the vitality of the local economy and community life.
- The effectiveness of taxpayer dollars should be maximized by investing government funds in public infrastructure and facilities in the most efficient manner possible.

