



Tompkins County
Comprehensive Plan

2004

Summary

Planning *for our* Future

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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

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.

Tompkins County Comprehensive Plan

Foreward

The Tompkins County Comprehensive Plan contains Principles, Policies and Actions that can help lead our community to a bright future. The Plan is based on the overarching principle that we must work together, between different levels of government and among public and private sectors, if we are to be successful as a community. Working together within the framework of this plan, we can envision the Tompkins County of twenty years from now as a place where:

- An improved housing supply serves a modest increase in population. A greater diversity and variety of housing options helps meet the needs of a changing population and the increase in supply, along with efforts to serve the needs of special target populations, helps support greater affordability.
- Traffic congestion is mitigated by locating new housing closer to jobs and services. An enhanced public transit system, as well as pedestrian paths and bikeways, link population nodes and employment centers, making at least one viable alternative to the private automobile convenient to a majority of commuters. Transportation infrastructure and service improvements to our arterial road network and air service strengthen Tompkins County's economic links to the region, the nation, and the world.
- The local economy remains strong with increased opportunity for all. Community economic development partners provide support for entrepreneurs, particularly in emerging sectors of the economy, and provide education and training to allow all residents to find meaningful employment at a fair wage. Our institutions of higher education remain preeminent and underpin our economic and community vitality. Tompkins County continues to emerge as a regional cultural center, and tourism flourishes as Ithaca and Tompkins County become recognized as the most exciting gateway to the Finger Lakes region.
- Rural communities are thriving, in large part due to sustainable use of agricultural and forest resources. There is increased diversity in the agriculture sector, often serving local and regional markets, and an emerging clean energy component based on renewable resources. Forest lands are conserved and managed to provide multiple benefits to water resources, sustainable yields of forest products, wildlife habitat, and reduction of greenhouse gases.
- A clean Cayuga Lake is the centerpiece of the community, and is fed by clear-flowing, green-belted streams. Public access to the lake is enhanced with new and improved parks, and a vibrant urban waterfront has developed in the City of Ithaca. Plentiful clean surface and ground water provides for domestic, commercial, industrial, and recreational uses. Water is recognized as an important community asset in a world where an abundant supply of clean water is an increasingly scarce commodity.

- The landscape of the county looks much the same as it is today but public access to our natural wonders has been improved. Protected forests and natural areas increase from 13 percent to about 20 percent of the land, and about one-third of the county is active farmland. Within this landscape, outstanding natural features, including gorges, stream corridors, lakeshores, forested hillsides, wetlands, and wildlife habitats are protected, defining the natural character of the community, maintaining its scenic beauty, and sustaining its biological diversity.
- Livable neighborhoods, vibrant commercial districts, and thriving employment centers have become more integrated and are increasingly linked by pedestrian paths and bikeways, supporting a more convenient, healthy, and less stressful way of life. A trail system links all four of the county's state parks. A more physically active and socially healthy community has developed. Efforts to accommodate growth in existing communities have allowed historic elements of the built environment to be used in ways that maintain their integrity and functionality.
- Growth in population is concentrated around existing population centers in accordance with local comprehensive plans. Most new development is built at increased density and designed to include attractive buildings, landscaping, and streetscapes that promote neighborly interaction and greatly enhance the quality of life. In accordance with local community plans, "new villages" are developing in places like South Lansing, Danby, and Jacksonville to complement modest growth in and around existing villages, hamlets, and the City of Ithaca.
- Finally, improved regional planning and increased intermunicipal cooperation results in greater fiscal efficiency. Combined with a strong local economy, this reduces and stabilizes the impact of the cost of public services on local homeowners, small businesses and major employers. Local residents view county, town, city, and village governments as a system that provides services in the most efficient manner possible while enhancing participatory democracy at the local government and neighborhood level.

It is within our reach to become this place, a place that reflects our community's values, builds on our many assets, and improves the quality of life for all our people. The Tompkins County Comprehensive Plan can serve as a guiding document to help define the steps we need to take to reach this future, monitor progress as we go, and provide a framework within which to adjust strategies along the way.

Edward C. Marx, AICP
Commissioner of Planning
December 2004

Policies and Priority Action Items

The Comprehensive Plan identifies 61 priority actions to be initiated in the next five years. These action items are the short-term activities that Tompkins County government or community partners can undertake to advance the Plan's principles and policies and the County's vision and mission. Below are the policies and associated action items identified for each section of the Plan.

Housing Choices

Policies

- Provide for a variety of quality living experiences, including rural, suburban, hamlet, village, and urban.
- Protect consumers' housing options throughout the county by providing a mix of choices of location, accessibility, housing types, and neighborhood character.
- Provide and encourage more quality rental and owner-occupied affordable housing options for very low-, low-, and moderate-income residents.
- Promote increased owner-occupied housing in the county.
- Maintain an adequate supply of affordable housing options for people with special needs, including seniors who wish to remain in their homes and persons requiring healthcare, custodial care, or supportive services.
- Promote housing opportunities for locally employed persons who would prefer to live in Tompkins County.

Action Items

- ➔ Produce a three- to five-year affordable housing needs assessment to use as a basis to guide development of appropriate subsidized rental and ownership housing to meet local needs.
- ➔ Conduct a survey of in-commuters to determine the reasons they live outside of Tompkins County.
- ➔ Develop or identify model provisions for land development regulations that encourage affordable housing.
- ➔ Provide education and training programs for elected officials, board members, community leaders, developers and builders, and the general public on the need for and benefits of affordable housing development.
- ➔ Identify subsidized affordable housing units and determine when subsidies expire and if the units are likely to remain affordable. Establish a program to monitor the status of those units to anticipate impending deficiencies.
- ➔ Build a new Community Residence – Single Room Occupancy mental health facility.
- ➔ Develop plans to meet the housing needs of segments of the population that require supportive services, including seniors, independent (or at-risk) youth, and the homeless.

Transportation Choices

Policies

- Enhance the design function and safety of the existing road network while making investments in technology and design that increase its operating efficiency.
- Make selective additions or modifications to the highway network to address capacity limitations that cannot otherwise be addressed.
- Coordinate land use and infrastructure planning to meet the needs of drivers, pedestrians, bicyclists, transit riders, and community residents.
- Enhance and promote the use of bicycles and walking as viable forms of transportation by supporting the provision of safe public facilities, including multi-use trails, bicycle routes, bicycle lanes, and sidewalks.
- Enhance transportation options and provide facilities that allow passengers to transfer easily and safely from one mode of transportation to another (e.g., biking to bus service).
- Provide affordable and accessible public transportation to important destinations, hamlets and villages, the Ithaca urban area, and points outside the county.
- Promote a transportation system that supports nodal, compact development patterns and reduces negative environmental impacts.

Action Items

- ➔ Develop a bicycle suitability map for Tompkins County.
- ➔ Identify infill opportunities at nodes along transit lines.
- ➔ Develop a countywide State Route 13 Corridor Management Plan.
- ➔ Complete a traffic signal upgrade and intersection evaluation program.
- ➔ Develop a centralized, uniform accident reporting system.
- ➔ Work with municipalities to assess transportation infrastructure needs, including roadways, transit, bicycles, and pedestrians, to support local planning efforts.
- ➔ Facilitate municipal review of local development regulations to address future performance of the transportation system.
- ➔ Implement recommendations in the Freight Transportation Study to minimize negative aspects of freight transportation, while increasing safety.
- ➔ Develop a countywide comprehensive park and ride Plan.

Jobs and Business

Policies

- Provide a setting where businesses, particularly locally owned ones, can flourish by enhancing the county's natural resources, arts and culture, lively urban core, and vital neighborhoods.
- Support economic development that provides quality employment opportunities to local residents, good wages and benefits, and affordable goods and services.
- Encourage the procurement of goods and services from local farms, businesses, and service providers.
- Support tourism in the area by encouraging local institutions, businesses, and facilities to better plan, coordinate, and expand tourism-related activities locally and regionally.
- Enhance transportation options, including freight and air service, to support business development, while preserving the integrity of existing communities.
- Work closely with the local institutions of higher learning to enhance those institutions' significant and integral contributions to the local economy and community life.

Action Items

- ➔ Complete and implement the workforce development plan, striving to meet the needs of the unemployed and underemployed through job creation activities, and the needs of employers through employment and training programs.
- ➔ Enhance the ability to analyze costs and benefits of projects as well as improve post-project job data collection to determine whether the public purpose of projects is realized.
- ➔ Continue to lobby for State Empire Zone status and explore regional partnerships to share underutilized economic development resources.
- ➔ Continue to explore ways to improve the cost and convenience of air service for county employers, visitors, and local residents.
- ➔ Utilize Cornell University's resources to greater advantage, including: work with Cornell to improve technology transfer, and study feasibility of a business attraction initiative using specific Cornell research and development programs as the key elements.
- ➔ Promote and assist in the development of the county's tourism attractions, including cultural, natural, and commercial attractions.
- ➔ Develop a strategy to promote local use and consumption of locally produced goods.
- ➔ Encourage the formation, retention, and expansion of manufacturing and high tech businesses.

Rural Resources

Policies

- Enhance the viability of existing farming operations and agricultural businesses, and encourage new ones to be formed.
- Support sustainable formal and informal resource-based economic development activities, such as forest management, timber harvesting, and agri-tourism, which support a rural way of life.
- Sustain and enhance the agricultural activities and working farms within the Agricultural Resources Focus Areas identified in the Plan, and within locally designated important agricultural areas.
- Encourage development that is designed to preserve open space and valuable agricultural and forest land.
- Protect prime agricultural land for agricultural use.
- Support community and economic development efforts that enhance the incomes of, or provide services primarily to, rural residents.

Action Items

- ➔ Determine the feasibility of a rural micro-enterprise program, including adding a component to the County's Economic Development Revolving Loan Fund.
- ➔ Update the Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan with a particular focus on promoting the viability and profitability of agriculture within the county.
- ➔ Establish a program to protect and manage land for agricultural and forestry use in the focus areas identified in the Comprehensive Plan using tools appropriate to the functions of those resources.
- ➔ Develop or identify model performance standards to preserve agriculture and forest land.

Water Resources

Policies

- Promote appropriate development of waterfront lands for water-dependent or water-enhanced uses, including enhancing public access to Cayuga Lake.
- Protect water quality and quantity in the county's streams, lakes, and groundwater.
- Protect drinking water supplies from contamination.
- Protect stream corridors, wetlands, and land areas that are seasonally inundated by water.

Action Items

- ➔ Complete watershed assessments for the Fall Creek and Six Mile Creek drinking water sources.
- ➔ Continue to conduct aquifer studies.
- ➔ Initiate inspection and maintenance requirements for individual on-site wastewater treatment systems.
- ➔ Update the county flood hazard mitigation program to incorporate watershed-based approaches to reducing the risk of flood damages.
- ➔ Update floodplain maps.
- ➔ Develop or identify model stream buffer ordinances.
- ➔ Develop a system to provide for regular maintenance of existing drainage systems and use of appropriate road ditching techniques on County-maintained roads, and encourage the use of such techniques on other roads in the county.
- ➔ Develop boat docking, boat service areas, and a waterfront commercial district on, and in the vicinity of, Inlet Island in the City of Ithaca.
- ➔ Redevelop the NYSDOT Maintenance Facility site with water-dependent and/or water-enhanced projects to provide economic benefits to the City and the County and provide public access to the water's edge.
- ➔ Dredge Cayuga Inlet and find an appropriate method for disposal of dredge spoil material, for example, using dredged material to create new, functioning wetlands at the south end of Cayuga Lake.
- ➔ Prepare a Cayuga Lake water quality and quantity monitoring plan.

Natural Features

Policies

- Preserve the natural features, ecosystems, and forest lands within the Natural Resources Focus Areas identified in the Comprehensive Plan.
- Preserve and protect scenic views, areas of natural beauty, and the rural character of Tompkins County.
- Protect the ecological, economic, and recreational functions and beauty of Cayuga Lake.
- Preserve and enhance existing parks, hiking trails, active and passive recreation facilities, and historic resources, and foster the creation of new recreational amenities.

Action Items

- ➔ Establish an open-space program to protect or preserve natural resources and recreational amenities in the focus areas identified in the Comprehensive Plan using tools appropriate to the functions of those resources.
- ➔ Define stream corridor buffers for the major tributaries to Cayuga Lake and encourage use of appropriate measures to preserve the designated stream corridors.
- ➔ Develop and disseminate educational information tailored to each Natural Features Focus Area and each Agricultural Resources Focus Area.
- ➔ Conduct a Scenic Resources Inventory and prepare a Scenic Resources Preservation Plan.
- ➔ Develop or identify model performance standards to preserve natural resources.
- ➔ Develop or obtain a system to track land use changes and preservation efforts.
- ➔ Complete the Cayuga Waterfront Trail and the Black Diamond Trail.

Strong Communities

Policies

- Facilitate the creation and maintenance of a safe, appealing, and efficient multi-purpose network for walking and enhance the pedestrian environment through appropriate design.
- Locate County government facilities and encourage other community facilities to be located within population centers, particularly those facilities that provide opportunities for social interaction, group activities, community events, and meeting spaces.
- Encourage the development of diverse communities that provide a mix of uses, a variety of employment options, social and recreational opportunities, and an assortment of amenities within walking distance of residential development.
- Enhance the quality of communities by improving the character of the built environment, including visually appealing architectural elements and streetscapes that encourage pedestrian travel, facilitate community interaction, and promote public safety.
- Preserve and enhance the distinct identities and historic character of existing neighborhoods and structures, and encourage the development of new neighborhoods that possess their own special sense of place, through attractive design of public places; proximity to schools, parks and other services; and community festivals and events.
- Improve transportation options for people who need access to employment, schools, shopping, health facilities, and community services.

Action Items

- ➔ Advance implementation of a countywide multiuse trail network.
- ➔ Conduct pedestrian level-of-service and walkability studies in neighborhoods, villages, and hamlets throughout the county.
- ➔ Provide pedestrian connections between the waterfront and downtown through urban creek corridors.

Centers of Development

Policies

- Strengthen and enhance the City of Ithaca's downtown area as the urban center of the county.
- Strengthen and enhance the villages and hamlets of the county as vital service and community centers.
- Increase the amount and density of housing and business space in the central business districts throughout the county.
- Promote greater density by encouraging development of existing "gaps" left by abandoned buildings and vacant parcels.
- Concentrate appropriate commercial, industrial, and retail development onto relatively small amounts of land, in close proximity to housing and consumers, in existing areas of concentrated development.

Action Items

- ➔ Work with municipalities to identify and map areas appropriate for infill development.
- ➔ Develop or identify model development design standards that address how to maintain a distinct edge between the urban/village areas and the rural countryside.
- ➔ Evaluate and modify the following programs for consistency with and furtherance of the nodal development patterns: review of development proposals under General Municipal Law 239, Economic Development Revolving Loan Fund, Agricultural Districts, and advisory boards' work programs.
- ➔ Work with municipalities to develop land use scenarios consistent with the Comprehensive Plan and with local land use plans and policies.

Efficient Use of Public Funds

Policies

- Maintain County facilities to protect the public's investment, to effectively serve residents, and to provide an efficient working environment for employees now and in the future.
- Optimize the value of community investments in water treatment and distribution facilities and in sewer collection and treatment facilities by encouraging higher density in areas served by these facilities.
- Save public costs by encouraging new development to locate in places contiguous to existing development where sewer, water, roads, and other infrastructure already exist, or are planned as part of a comprehensive plan to accommodate projected growth.
- Consider intermunicipal alternatives when addressing issues related to water supply and wastewater disposal.

Action Items

- ➔ Develop or identify model land development regulations and design standards that support denser development in areas with water and sewer services (including residential, infill, and mixed-use) and limited development in areas without such services.
- ➔ Review responsibility for highway management and maintenance based on the function of the highways.
- ➔ Evaluate a downtown office plan for future County facility needs.
- ➔ Determine the location of future County Health Department facility and the future use of the Biggs B Building.
- ➔ Implement the countywide Public Safety Communications System project.
- ➔ Evaluate the need to renovate or expand the County Public Safety Building to meet projected needs.
- ➔ Conduct regular meetings with officials from adjacent counties to focus on ways to reduce overall costs to taxpayers.
- ➔ Explore the feasibility of developing an Official County Map.