

overarching principles

Three overarching principles have guided the preparation of this Comprehensive Plan: Sustainability, Regional Cooperation, and Fiscal Responsibility. This section discusses each of these principles and how it influences the four topical sections of this plan, as well as describes some of the current community efforts that support these principles.

PRINCIPLE

TOMPKINS COUNTY SHOULD BE A PLACE WHERE THE NEEDS OF CURRENT AND FUTURE GENERATIONS ARE MET WITHOUT COMPROMISING THE ECOSYSTEMS UPON WHICH THEY DEPEND.

SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability means equitably meeting the needs of all community members now and in the future. This includes ensuring that everyone has a wide range of choices that allow them to share in economic prosperity, live in a healthy environment, and participate in community life. It requires preserving biodiversity and natural ecosystems and conserving resources to ensure their ability to sustain future generations. It further entails advancing economic vitality, environmental stewardship, and social equity simultaneously -- by making sure a decision to advance one of these does not come at the expense of another.

How Sustainability is Addressed in the Comprehensive Plan

THE ECONOMY, HOUSING AND TRANSPORTATION. The economy, housing, and transportation play vital roles in meeting the needs of current and future generations. A strong economy is essential to an economic prosperity broad enough to be shared by all. It must include providing education and training and creating entry-level jobs with career paths. Making this an equitable community requires availability of affordable housing near employment. Stable housing impacts families in many ways including the ability of children to do well in school, giving them a better chance of advancing economically. The County cannot reach its greenhouse gas emissions reduction goals without a strong focus on energy efficiency in all sectors, including an efficient transportation system.

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THE ENVIRONMENT. Although the environmental aspects of sustainability are apparent, the health of natural and water resources also factor into social and economic outcomes. Providing equitable access to public open spaces provides opportunities for exercise and improves public health. It promotes equity by ensuring everyone in the community can enjoy these benefits, regardless of where they live or how much money they

make. Preserving biodiversity boosts ecosystem productivity and resiliency. A healthy natural environment provides a number of benefits for everyone: clean water, food and wood products, nutrient storage and recycling, and pollution breakdown and absorption. When these natural functions break down there is often a heavy cost incurred to provide these necessities.

CLIMATE CHANGE. Since the 1950s, access to cheap oil, gas, and coal has spurred explosive growth in the consumption of fossil fuels. This growth has been strongly linked to spiking greenhouse gas emissions and, in turn, global climate change that is predicted to result in extreme weather patterns and disrupted ecosystems. All aspects of a sustainable community are threatened by climate change. Those without the financial resources to take the steps that would help most, such as living close to jobs, installing energy efficiency upgrades in their homes, and purchasing more fuel-efficient vehicles, are likely to face increasing energy costs. These same people are also often the most vulnerable to floods, extreme heat events, droughts, and other predicted impacts of climate change. Social equity requires that we devise solutions with particular attention to the needs of the economically disadvantaged. A sustainable, economically prosperous future will be one where agricultural land, water resources, and local forests, as well as our renewable energy sources of wind and sun, are managed to provide multiple benefits for current and future generations.

NEIGHBORHOODS AND COMMUNITIES. Providing opportunities for people, regardless of income, to live in compact high quality communities will help address the issues of environmental quality, social equity, and economic prosperity that underpin the concept of sustainability. Development Focus Areas that are safe, healthy, attractive, accessible, and affordable will provide places where people want to live, work, and raise families. Enabling people to live active lives with access to the places, recreation, and social interactions they desire can sustain a high quality of life for all people regardless of income. Agreeing where the community welcomes development will reduce pressure to develop in areas valued by the community for their important agricultural, recreational, and natural resources and make desired development more economically feasible.

The County entered into an energy performance contract to realize over \$4 million in energy cost avoidance over 15 years.

Initiatives

COUNTY GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES. Tompkins County has been working to advance sustainability for many years. In 2006, an employee-based effort began to more systematically focus on developing sustainable practices within Tompkins County government. This led to the Tompkins County Legislature authorizing the County Administrator to appoint a Tompkins County Sustainability Team. The Team has been charged with developing an action plan to promote sustainable practices by Tompkins County government and to report on progress. In 2014, the Sustainability Team prepared a formal *Tompkins County Sustainability Strategy* for the County's government operations, which was accepted by the Legislature.

Tompkins County has made formal sustainability commitments, adopted policies, undertaken energy improvements to its facilities, installed renewable energy systems on all its buildings, taken actions within and between its various departments, and pursued a number of other efforts related to sustainability. Specific policies adopted by the County Legislature are:

- Waste Reduction and Resource Management Policy (2007): to recognize the goals set forth by the *Tompkins County Solid Waste Management Plan* through procedures to reduce the amount of waste produced by County operations and maximize opportunities for reuse and recycling.
- Facilities Management and Workplace Environment Policy (2009): to establish procedures for managing and operating facilities in a manner that provides clean, well-maintained, and energy-efficient workplace environments for staff and visitors. In 2005, the County entered into an Energy Performance Contract with Johnson Controls intended to realize over \$4 million in energy cost avoidance during the 15 year term of the contract.
- Green Fleet Policy (2009): to reduce fossil fuel consumption and greenhouse gas emissions from County-owned vehicles and fuel-using mobile equipment.
- Green Building Policy (2013): to use green building standards for all new construction and major renovations of County-owned buildings.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES. Many local governments in Tompkins County have been leaders in sustainability efforts and many have made significant investments to reduce energy use and green their government operations. The City of Ithaca and Towns of Dryden and Ithaca have each, in recent years, undertaken sustainability planning efforts. These have included preparation of greenhouse gas inventories, establishment of long-term goals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and local energy action plans to achieve those goals. The Town of Caroline has also undertaken similar efforts using a collaborative approach among town government, residents, and other interested persons to achieve energy independence from fossil fuels on a municipal and residential level. Nearly all of the local governments in Tompkins County have some efforts underway at the government or citizen level to reduce energy use and make living in their municipalities more sustainable.

OTHER LOCAL INITIATIVES. Through proactive initiatives led by community members, the community is embracing the challenges of creating a sustainable way of living. Local individuals, businesses, government agencies, non-profit organizations, and academic institutions are focusing on critical areas such as energy, transportation, waste, and local food and are addressing the pressing issues with innovative solutions.

All three institutions of higher education, Cornell University, Ithaca College, and Tompkins Cortland Community College, have made a long-term commitment to more sustainable practices on campus as well as incorporating sustainability issues into their research and academic efforts. Cornell University recently announced its agreement to purchase all electricity generated by the proposed Black Oak Wind Farm in Enfield. In addition, more than 63 percent of waste on Cornell's campus is recycled or composted, including 823 tons of food from the dining halls. Ithaca College is one of the first institutions of higher education in the world to have two LEED Platinum-level facilities on its campus. And Tompkins Cortland Community College installed an array of solar panels that will collect enough photovoltaic energy to provide the lighting needs for six classrooms.

New local and regional organizations have also been established to pursue and promote a more sustainable community. A sampling of these includes:

- **Sustainable Tompkins**, a citizen-based organization, leads the sustainability movement in the area, working towards the long-term well-being of our communities

by integrating social equity, economic vitality, ecological stewardship, and personal and civic responsibility.

- **The Sustainability Center** provides a place where residents and visitors can learn about the community's collective efforts toward sustainability and serves as a setting for community discussions and programs addressing a broad range of sustainability issues.
- **Green Resource Hub of the Finger Lakes** is a non-profit organization that looks to expand the marketplace for sustainable living in the Finger Lakes region.
- **The SEEN** (Sustainable Enterprise & Entrepreneur Network), a program of the Green Resource Hub, is a group of local and regional businesses, organizations, and individuals who are committed to building a just and sustainable economy.
- **The Tompkins County Climate Protection Initiative** brings together leaders from the business, non-profit, local government, and education organizations that have made significant commitments to climate protection. This coalition seeks to leverage the climate action commitments made by institutions and organizations throughout the county.
- **Finger Lakes ReUse, Inc.** re-directs materials from the waste stream into productive new uses. Tons of building materials, computers, electronics, household goods, appliances, and furniture unnecessarily enter the landfill. Used materials – too often wasted – are assets with overlooked economic value. Finger Lakes ReUse taps this value to strengthen the economy, build community, and protect the environment.
- **Get Your GreenBack Tompkins** is a community-based campaign, managed through Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County, to inspire all 42,000 households and every business in Tompkins County to take at least one step to save energy and money in the areas of food, waste, transportation, and heating and lighting.
- **Learn@EcoVillageIthaca** shares skills knowledge and experience through a variety of educational opportunities based at Ithaca's renowned cohousing community.

THE ENVIRONMENT. Most environmental issues are regional in scope, requiring regional action. For example, what happens in one part of a watershed can have impacts hundreds of miles away. National efforts to restore the Chesapeake Bay impact Tompkins County, as the southern part of the county is part of the Susquehanna River Basin which ultimately drains into Chesapeake Bay. Wildlife corridors also cross municipal boundaries, facilitating the movement of wildlife and providing vital sources of food and shelter for a wide variety of animals. Without regional cooperation to protect these corridors, breaking or fragmenting the connections in one community can affect wildlife movement and health over a substantial region.

CLIMATE CHANGE. The scale of the energy and greenhouse gas challenges warrant intermunicipal and regional collaboration to transform the current energy system. The County led the effort to prepare the *Cleaner Greener Southern Tier Regional Sustainability Plan*. The *Plan* focuses on reducing greenhouse gas emissions throughout the eight-county region and identifies a series of actions that will help the region become a place where energy needs are increasingly supplied by renewable technologies or reduced by conservation and efficiency. Many community initiatives, including those of local governments, institutions of higher education, local coalitions, the business community, and nonprofits, are already underway. By combining efforts to reduce energy demand, transition to alternative energy sources, and prepare for the impacts of climate change, the community will be as prepared as possible to face the evolving climate and energy future.

NEIGHBORHOODS AND COMMUNITIES. Where and how growth occurs is an issue that requires collaboration across municipal boundaries and has enormous impacts on regional environmental quality, economic opportunity, and the cost of government. Achieving a desired pattern of development will depend on the actions and support of every town, village, and city within Tompkins County. Only by adopting local plans, policies, and regulations needed to allow mixed-use development in Development Focus Areas at the densities required for vibrant communities and encouraging land uses that support the maintenance of working landscapes outside of these areas will the regional vision be possible.

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Initiatives

REGIONAL PLANNING INITIATIVES. Planning at a regional level can help counties and their municipalities address issues against the backdrop of broader forces and issues. This Plan identifies ways Tompkins County can work on such a scale to address important issues that transcend county boundaries.

Recently, the County has participated in two major regional planning efforts with other Southern Tier counties: the Southern Tier Regional Economic Development Council's *Economic Development Strategy* and the *Cleaner Greener Southern Tier Regional Sustainability Plan*. In particular the *Cleaner Greener Plan* covers many of the same topics addressed in this Comprehensive Plan, only at a regional level, including energy and greenhouse gas emissions, transportation, land use and livable communities, economic development, working lands and open space, climate change adaptation, and water management.

COORDINATING COUNTY AND LOCAL PLANNING ACTIVITIES. 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.

The Tompkins County Council of Governments (TCCOG) is an association of local governments organized to work towards "more efficient and fiscally responsible delivery of government services." Its goals include expanding cooperation among taxing entities and resolving duplication of services, improving communication among local governments, and improving involvement with school districts.

TCCOG has provided leadership on a number of regional issues being addressed by municipalities in Tompkins County. For example, TCCOG's Task Force on Gas Drilling helped manage the large amount of information about high volume hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling for natural gas. They also prepared a compendium of Municipal Tools for Addressing Potential Gas Drilling Impacts, providing local municipalities with information on numerous ways they can understand and prepare for gas drilling activities.

This Comprehensive Plan outlines ways the Tompkins County community can continue to address intermunicipal issues cooperatively. Often, local municipalities have a full workload simply addressing the important day-to-day issues of local concern. Planning at the county level can help municipal governments address key issues of concern that cross municipal boundaries, 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.

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ificant public cost savings, particularly in terms of emergency medical and criminal justice services. A transportation system that relies more heavily on transit, walking, and biking would ultimately result in more manageable infrastructure maintenance costs. Every effort made to promote a healthy economy, adequate supply of housing, and balanced transportation system has potentially positive financial impacts that will affect the resources available to meet the community's needs today and into the future.

FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY

PRINCIPLE

TOMPKINS COUNTY SHOULD BE A PLACE WHERE TAXPAYER DOLLARS ARE INVESTED IN PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE AND FACILITIES IN THE MOST EFFICIENT MANNER POSSIBLE.

Tompkins County, municipal government, and school district operations are funded through four general sources of funds: local property tax, sales tax, Federal and State aid, and other sources, including fees and grants. Whatever the source, nearly all fiscal resources ultimately come from taxpayers – and Tompkins County takes seriously its role in using these taxpayer dollars judiciously. The County constantly works to maintain a financially sound government for future generations without placing an undue hardship on its taxpayers. As part of this role, the County maintains funding to deal with emergency situations that may arise unexpectedly.

How Fiscal Responsibility is Addressed in the Comprehensive Plan

THE ECONOMY, HOUSING AND TRANSPORTATION. Attracting and retaining jobs that pay living wages reduces the need for public assistance to bridge the gap between individuals' incomes and their basic life needs. A strong economy provides the tax base necessary to support public services. The provision of stable housing, including supportive services for those that need them, yields signif-

THE ENVIRONMENT. Protecting important natural resources makes fiscal sense. The cost of treating water for public consumption is lower when the water entering the system is fairly clean to begin with. Avoiding the adverse impacts associated with stormwater runoff using natural systems, like wetlands, is less expensive than using engineered systems, like detention basins. And exposure to a polluted environment can lead to increased public health costs.

CLIMATE CHANGE. The anticipated impacts of climate change are expected to dramatically increase government expenditures. Post-disaster recovery costs are often paid with local, state, and federal government funds. The increasingly intense storms will also strain local stormwater infrastructure. Anticipating impacts and planning to reduce their severity is fiscally prudent. It is often much cheaper to avoid the problems associated with severe weather than it is to pay for recovery after the fact.

NEIGHBORHOODS AND COMMUNITIES. Compact development lowers costs of government services by utilizing and reinvesting in existing infrastructure and broadening the base that bears the cost of maintaining that infrastructure into the future.

Initiatives

WORKING WITH OTHER LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT. Tompkins County includes nine towns, six villages, and one city, all of which similarly work to provide services, infrastructure, and facilities to serve their citizens. In addition, State and Federal agencies serve the county directly by providing services or indirectly by funding other governments to provide services. All of these organizations strive to work together to provide seamless services to residents.

TCCOG has undertaken a number of activities to reduce the overall cost of government to the residents of the County.

- They created the Greater Tompkins County Municipal Health Insurance Consortium in 2010 (the first in New York State) to provide affordable health insurance, prescription drug coverage, and other ancillary benefits to its members. Overall health insurance spending was reduced due to pooling resources and risks, stabilizing annual premiums, and reducing administrative expenses.
- They sponsored a Countywide Intermunicipal Water and Sewer Infrastructure Study conducted by Tompkins County Area Development to identify areas for strategic investment of infrastructure funds; and
- They comment on pending State, Federal, and County actions concerning their impact on local municipalities.

MAINTAINING INFRASTRUCTURE. Investments in public infrastructure and facilities represent a significant portion of local taxpayer dollars, particularly considering the capital cost of building the facilities, the long-term cost to maintain aging systems and adapt facilities to comply with

evolving technical and regulatory requirements, and the day-to-day operating costs. Strategic infrastructure investments support community and economic development and have long term impacts on communities. Infrastructure planning needs to consider land use priorities, the public facilities to support them, and the financial capacity to support both the development and maintenance of the systems.

The communities of Tompkins County have a successful history of delivering water and sewer services to meet the growing demands of residential, commercial, institutional, and industrial customers. Many partnerships and other cooperative efforts exist between municipalities to provide these services efficiently in response to the changing needs of the community.

Inter-governmental cooperation reduces costs by ensuring the infrastructure developed and maintained by the State, County, and local municipalities functions as an interconnected system. Cooperative agreements between governmental units can also reduce costs by allowing for equipment sharing and joint infrastructure investments, and by reducing duplication of effort. ◆