# development patterns

A pattern of development that replicates characteristics of traditional neighborhoods or builds new neighborhoods based on the efficient use of existing infrastructure and strengths of existing communities will combat sprawl and preserve open land, natural resources, and public and private funds. Such development can take many forms, from clustered housing in rural hamlets to dense urban neighborhoods. It also allows for choice of living environments including existing suburban areas and rural homesteads.

## PRINCIPLE

Tompkins County should be a place where new development is focused in compact, walkable, mixed-use communities.

## POLICIES

It is the policy of Tompkins County to:

- Strengthen downtowns as retail, service, employment, and community centers.
- Encourage municipalities to protect rural character and scenic resources by limiting sprawl.
- Promote more housing and mixed-use development in Development Focus Areas.
- Support land use policies and regulations and public infrastructure improvements to encourage private investment in the Development Focus Areas.
- Preserve and enhance the distinct identities and historic character of existing communities.

# SNAPSHOT
## OF THE COUNTY TODAY

Historic patterns of traditional development are still very visible and prominent in much of Tompkins County. The pattern of a main street neatly lined with historic buildings sitting amid a grid of neighborhood streets can be seen in the City of Ithaca and its neighborhoods, and in most villages and historic hamlets. Suburban development patterns, which were the dominant development trend of the second half of the twentieth century, can also be found throughout the county.

Nationally, during the post-World War II era, many communities experienced rapid expansion at the edges of their population centers. Central neighborhoods within cities, towns, and villages were emptied of wealth and workers in favor of newer, low density, dispersed developments on their fringes. This pattern of development has had a dramatic effect on the social and economic viability of existing communities, as well as significant impacts on the natural environment and quality of community life. The development of formerly open lands has reduced plant and animal habitats, degraded water resources, and influenced transportation choices that have degraded air quality, reduced physical activity, and increased the threat of global climate change.

This pattern is evident in Tompkins County. For over half a century, new construction has primarily located in rural areas, outside of the city and villages, by a ratio of two to one. This suburban sprawl and low-density, scattered rural development have provided additional housing and living options for residents. In the 1960s and 70s, a significant

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new commercial center was established in what is now the Village of Lansing. After the construction of NYS Route 13, shopping centers and apartment complexes were drawn to the access provided by the Triphammer Road interchange with Route 13.

More recently, commercial development has gravitated to the Southwest portion of the City of Ithaca, with development of several big box stores and related smaller commercial plazas.

Development outside established centers of development uses more land. Between 1995 and 2012, the amount of developed land in Tompkins County increased by 25 percent, or 6,000 acres, while the population only increased by five percent. Nearly 90 percent of the newly developed lands were outside the Development Focus Areas.

# ISSUES AND
# OPPORTUNITIES

### Sprawl and Traditional Neighborhoods

Sprawl has led to disinvestment in traditional community centers and degradation of urban and village neighborhoods. In some cases community green spaces have been lost to make room for highways, parking, and drive-through convenience. At the same time rural areas have experienced fragmentation and loss of farmland, forests, wildlife habitats, and other open space resources.

| Population and Housing in Villages and City | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *1980* | *1990* | *2000* | *2010* |
| **POPULATION** | | | | |
| In City and Villages | 47.3% | 45.3% | 43.9% | 43.2% |
| Outside City and Villages | 52.7% | 54.7% | 56.1% | 56.8% |
| **HOUSING UNITS** | | | | |
| In City and Villages | 48.0% | 44.7% | 43.5% | 41.7% |
| Outside City and Villages | 52.0% | 55.3% | 56.5% | 58.3% |

*Source: U.S. Census Bureau*

A key opportunity to combat this sprawling land use pattern is growing interest in returning to a pattern of development that resembles more closely the traditional neighborhood and village than the typical late twentieth century suburb. Evolving demographic, economic, environmental, and fiscal changes call for a return to communities built with these trends in mind:

- Baby boomers are downsizing and concerned about needing to drive everywhere

- Young adults are driving less and seeking to live in mixed-use neighborhoods

- Families are smaller

- More households have two wage earners

- Growth in household incomes is flatter

- State and Federal funds for infrastructure are no longer plentiful

- Energy costs, for housing and transportation, are growing

- Greenhouse gas emissions are widely accepted as driving climate change

New concepts of urban design make such density compatible with many of the amenities that were sought by those moving to suburban areas, such as more green space, more parks and trails, and increased safety. A denser pattern of development also provides enhanced living options for the aging population, including the opportunity to use public transit for health care visits and other services.

While density is concerning to many due to perceptions of noise and lack of privacy, new design features have made many of these concerns obsolete. For example, more energy-efficient homes with thicker walls and more insulation are often very quiet spaces and can be located in closer proximity without increasing noise. Other ways to create successful dense neighborhoods are to accommodate a diversity of residents at varying stages of life to create mixed age and income neighborhoods and to invest in public spaces with side-

> A denser pattern of development provides enhanced living options for the aging population.

> Nodal development uses the resources existing neighborhoods offer and maintains the value of public and private investments in infrastructure and facilities.

walks, public seating and gathering places, and street trees and other plantings to provide access to the outdoors.

Redevelopment in existing neighborhoods may threaten important historic resources. The preservation of historic resources can be fundamental to community character and quality. The massing, size, scale, materials, and architectural features of historic structures can provide design elements for use in new construction so redevelopment promotes the sense of place. The 1977 County publication of *Historic Preservation in Tompkins County* includes an inventory of historic resources in Tompkins County. Local municipalities can use local land use laws to establish standards for design and redevelopment of historic structures and in historic districts.
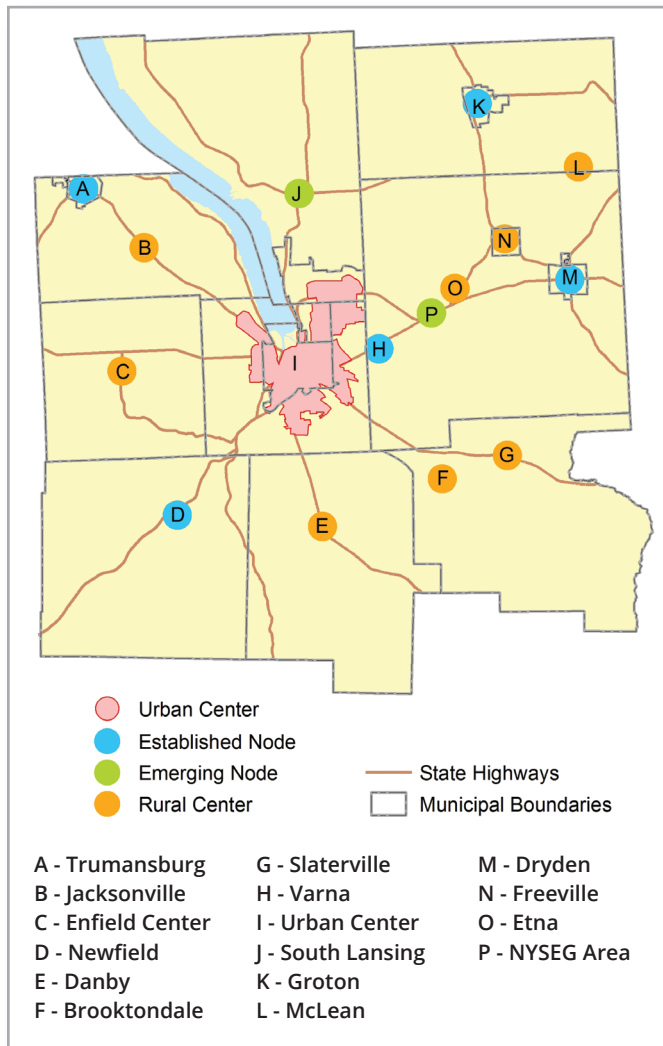
## The Cost of Sprawl

Sprawl has also contributed to an increasing cost of providing government services. Highways, water lines, and sewer lines have been extended beyond our capacity to maintain them in the long-term. Reliance on the automobile has increased traffic and put additional strain on the ability to maintain highway infrastructure. It has also created new problems of increased air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions that governments struggle to address. In rural and suburban areas strain has been placed on volunteer fire departments and other emergency services to meet the needs of a dispersed community.

## Nodal Development*

Nodal development, that is, development that is clustered in an existing or planned population center, is a way to direct growth towards existing communities already served by viable infrastructure. Nodal development uses the resources existing neighborhoods offer and maintains the value of public and private investment in community infrastructure and facilities. By encouraging development in these areas, communities benefit from a stronger tax base, closer proximity of jobs and services, increased efficiency of already

*\* For more information see The Economy Chapter, "Supporting Infrastructure for Economic Development - Commercial Centers" section.*

## Development Focus Areas



### Legend

- ● Urban Center
- ● Established Node
- ● Emerging Node
- ● Rural Center
- — State Highways
- ▢ Municipal Boundaries

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| A - Trumansburg | G - Slaterville | M - Dryden |
| B - Jacksonville | H - Varna | N - Freeville |
| C - Enfield Center | I - Urban Center | O - Etna |
| D - Newfield | J - South Lansing | P - NYSEG Area |
| E - Danby | K - Groton | |
| F - Brooktondale | L - McLean | |

*Source: Tompkins County Planning Department*

developed land and infrastructure, reduced development pressure in fringe areas, and conservation of farmland and open space.

A recent study and related strategy[1] adopted by Tompkins County identified four types of Development Focus Areas: one Urban Center, five Established Nodes, two Emerging Nodes, and eight Rural Centers. The difference among these types is largely a matter of scale and is mostly a function of the availability of public services, primarily public water and sewer and transit.

> Infill development consumes less land and makes more efficient use of existing facilities and services.

The **Urban Center** includes portions of the City of Ithaca, the Towns of Ithaca and Lansing, and the Villages of Cayuga Heights and Lansing and is the largest of the Development Focus Areas. The urban center is the historic employment, retail, service, and government center for the surrounding region; has a dense internal transit system, providing frequent opportunities to travel between destinations within the Center; has water and sewer infrastructure; and supports the greatest diversity of housing, businesses, and employment.

**Nodes,** whether established or emerging, are walkable in size. A general rule of thumb is that people are willing to walk up to ten minutes, roughly a half-mile, to run an errand or walk to school, but for any greater distance, the inclination shifts to driving. Nodes, like Urban Centers, have public water and sewer systems capable of supporting dense and diverse development. **Established Nodes,** as the name implies, already exist and have a mix of housing types, diverse businesses and services, and employment opportunities. **Emerging Nodes** have some water and sewer infrastructure (or plans for those services) with the capacity to support mixed-use development; however, they lack the mix of land uses that would make them Established Nodes.

**Rural Centers** are also walkable in size. They usually have a mix of residential development, employment, businesses, and services. The critical difference between Nodes and Rural Centers is the lack of water and sewer infrastructure in the Rural Centers. These centers lack both water and sewer infrastructure and, thus, cannot support the intensity of development envisioned in Nodes. However, they do serve an important function as commercial and service centers for the surrounding rural populations.

## Infill Development

Many existing neighborhoods can accommodate much of the growth that communities require through infill development, brownfields redevelopment, and the rehabilitation of existing buildings. Infill development consists of building homes, businesses, and public facilities on unused and underutilized lands within existing communities, including redevelopment of sites with existing buildings. Such development consumes less land and makes more efficient use of existing facilities and services. Taking advantage of infill development opportunities keeps resources where

*Restaurant Row in the City of Ithaca*

people already live, allows rebuilding to occur, creates density to support transit and other amenities, and is key to accommodating growth that supports the quality of life of existing residents.

Vacant land comes to mind first when considering infill development. However, underutilized land and brownfields, once cleaned, may offer even more opportunities. Single story strip malls can be converted to multiple story buildings with a combination of retail space on the first floor, offices on the second, and residences on upper floors. Large lots with one home can be redeveloped with two or three units.

Infill development requires special design considerations to assure projects fit the surrounding neighborhood, have access to adequate infrastructure to support the new demand for public services, and include design features that will attract new businesses and residents to the development.

### Livability Through Good Design[2]*

The success of Development Focus Areas depends, in large part, on their ability to create a vibrant, livable community that addresses both the shortcomings of sprawl as well as those features of lower density development that appeal to many. Although no single design template can be applied to all of these areas, there are planning and design principles that can help the community maintain its historic charac-

> Planning and design principles exist that can help maintain historic character while supporting more development.

ter while supporting additional development that provides a high quality of life.

**RESIDENTIALLY DIVERSE.** Development Focus Areas should be dynamic communities able to accommodate a diversity of residents at varying stages of life. From senior housing to family-oriented developments, successful Development Focus Areas contain a mix of housing types that appeal to a variety of demographic groups. Housing types include detached single-family homes, apartments, condominiums, and townhouses. This residential diversity helps accommodate a broad range of incomes and needs, while also helping support area services and businesses. With the higher densities, residential privacy and safety can be addressed through careful design, building orientation, and site layout.

**BUSINESSES AND SERVICES.** To best support its residents, the overwhelming majority of businesses and services in a Development Focus Area should be located in the core or, in the case of the Urban Center focus areas, neighborhood commercial areas. This concentration of services makes it easy for residents to run multiple errands on a single trip.

**WELL DESIGNED.** Good neighborhood design through the use of codes or design guidelines helps achieve higher residential densities while maintaining livability and is a prerequisite for attracting both residents and businesses. These should be specific to each Development Focus Area and created in consultation with property owners, businesses, and citizens. Codes or guidelines can stipulate simple design features like having storefronts and entryways face streets or parks.

**ADDRESS NOISE POLLUTION.** Noise pollution is a disincentive for people to move to denser areas. Buildings with thicker walls and more insulation can reduce indoor noise levels, as well as reducing energy use. Landscaping, building orientation, and glazing treatments specialized for sound abatement can also help reduce the impacts of noise on residents.

**PUBLIC REALM.** An active, engaging, and safe public realm is central to a successful Development Focus Area. Comfortable sidewalks, public seating and gathering places, street trees and other plantings, public art, and ground level street-front retail are all components of a public realm where

*\* For more information see the Healthy Communities Chapter, "Land Uses" and "Neighborhood Design" sections.*

people want to spend their time. Investing in and upgrading these spaces can help attract more pedestrians and street traffic and promote local businesses.

**GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE.** Natural features should be protected and integrated into Development Focus Areas. Notable vegetation and landforms should be maintained as focal points or incorporated in the overall design. The integration of natural landscapes and vegetation into urban settings contributes to stress reduction and better air quality. Naturalized stormwater management is also encouraged to reduce infrastructure service costs and create additional multi-purpose green and open space. In general, a minimum of 20 percent of a Development Focus Area's gross area should be maintained as park or open space.

**VEHICLE MOVEMENT.** As is the case in the City of Ithaca and villages in Tompkins County, State Highways transect most of the Development Focus Areas, creating special design challenges. The primary challenge will entail creating a street where the movement of vehicles *through* the area does not impede local pedestrian and bicycle activity *within* the area and, in fact, supports access to local businesses and services.

# TAKING ACTION

**STRATEGIES.** Although local government land use plans and regulations are the main drivers of what form the county takes in the future, Tompkins County prepared a Development Focus Areas strategy to create a coherent vision for development that crosses municipal boundaries. The other plan that looks across municipal lines at development patterns is the *Cleaner Greener Southern Tier Regional Sustainability Strategy*.

The Development Focus Areas Strategy identified five broad categories of actions needed to achieve the pattern of development envisioned here:

- *Density and Design.* Promote compact mixed-use development in the Development Focus Areas. The success of these communities will be dependent, in part, on the quality of design.

- *Development Regulations.* Review local laws, including zoning and subdivision regulations, to ensure they promote the type of development envisioned in this Strategy.

- *Infrastructure Improvements.* Implement improvements to existing public water and sewer systems to support compact mixed-use development.

- *Connections.* Provide pedestrian facilities within each Development Focus Area to make walking an attractive transportation alternative. Provide and maintain transit connections between the Urban Center and the other Development Focus Areas. Also, provide strong pedestrian and bicycle connections between the Development Focus Areas and nearby existing developed areas.

- *Controlling Sprawl.* Most of the benefits of concentrating growth in the Development Focus Areas will not be achieved if a sprawling pattern of development continues outside of these areas. Development outside the Development Focus Areas should not require the expansion of water, sewer, and transit services and should fit the character of the surrounding rural landscape. Limited infill of existing suburban areas might also be expected.

**PARTNERS.** As emphasized above, local governments play the key role in taking these actions. Towns, villages, and the City, working independently and together, can put in place the legal framework to support this strategy. They have the authority to make the day-to-day decisions to support this pattern of development.

Other important partners in helping to promote compact walkable communities are the providers of the infrastructure and services that form the base of these communities: water systems, wastewater systems, roads, and transit systems. In addition to municipalities, these are the Bolton Point Water System, the Ithaca Area Wastewater Treatment Facility, and Tompkins Consolidated Area Transit. The Downtown Ithaca Alliance works to maintain and develop downtown Ithaca as the county's center for "banking and finance, business and professional offices, government and community services, downtown residences, and as a retail destination."

**COUNTY ROLE.** It is envisioned in the future at least two-thirds of all new residential development would occur in the Development Focus Areas. Tompkins County's role is three-fold in achieving this vision: providing support to municipalities as they undertake these activities; strongly advocating for appropriate types of development within Development Focus Areas and rural land uses outside of

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the focus areas; and addressing the intermunicipal aspects of implementation, such as providing public transit services to the focus areas, focusing infrastructure investment in the focus areas, and promoting efforts to provide strong pedestrian and bicycle connections between the focus areas and nearby existing developed areas.

## County Actions to be Initiated within Two Years

- Work with municipalities to identify potential infill or redevelopment sites within Development Focus Areas.

- Provide technical assistance to municipalities to establish land use policies and regulations that support development within Development Focus Areas.

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[1]  *Building Vibrant Communities in Tompkins County … a Development Focus Areas Strategy.* 2012.

[2]  *Ibid.*