The nature of the Upstate rural population must also be taken into account. Rural poverty has proven difficult to eradicate. While the expansion of human services in recent decades has improved the lives of many low-income rural residents, poverty remains a very real and in some cases a very isolated plight in rural areas. Business growth can have a positive impact on the incomes of rural people; on the other hand, visual evidence of extreme poverty is a detriment to tourism and business patronage. Some rural residents value, above all, their privacy, peace and quiet, and lack of outside interference. For these reasons, they may be reluctant to apply for government-funded business assistance programs, and they may not seek to address what others perceive as community issues of benefit to all.

### Protecting Agriculture

Farmland makes up nearly a third of Tompkins County’s land area. Intact farmland is essential for an active agricultural economy and contributes to the scenic countryside that attracts tourists and businesses to the area. Nearly 100,000 acres of land are in farm ownership in the county, with about 80,000 being actively farmed. Approximately 230 full-time farms contribute $50 million annually to the local economy. Many more people are employed in farm-related jobs, such as transporting and processing farm products and supplying farmers with necessary supplies. The total value of farming to Tompkins County probably exceeds $100 million a year.

Farmland in Tompkins County has been lost to both abandonment and development. In 1987, there were 110,609 acres of land in farms. This decreased to 91,822 acres in 1992, and then increased slightly to 95,451 acres by 1997. Although the recent increase in land in farms suggests a degree of stabilization in the farmland base locally, the general trend indicates significant loss in agricultural land resources over time. This is consistent with the statewide trend in agricultural land conversions. The availability of productive land is essential to farm operations and the loss of these lands, and farms in general, is often permanent, highlighting the need to develop measures that can effectively protect important agricultural resources and local farms.

Our farmland is being consumed by residential, commercial, and sometimes industrial development. Since 1982, Tompkins County has lost more than 20 percent of its farmland. Randomly scattered development is common, primarily in the form of single-family homes along rural roads or as commercial strip development along highways. Non-farm development threatens the economic viability of farming by fragmenting the land base and intensifying conflicts between farmers and non-farm neighbors over such issues as noise, dust, odors, and trespass.

Historic farmland loss, however, is not solely the result of encroaching development. In fact, more farmland has been lost to abandonment than to development. Since the 1950s, over 30,000 acres of Tompkins County farmland has reverted to forest. Much of this loss is the result of abandonment of the more marginal farmland in the County.

### Existing Farmland Protection Efforts

Over the past 30 years, Tompkins County government has taken a non-regulatory, incentive-based approach to farmland protection, featuring voluntary participation by landowners in programs. Agricultural districts and the Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan form the foundation of farmland protection efforts. There are two agricultural districts in Tompkins County, serving some 340 farms and covering 83,400 acres of farmland. This encompasses the majority of the farmland in the county and approximately 27 percent of the county’s total land area. Participation in the agricultural districts program provides farmers with a number of benefits and protections, including protection from nuisance lawsuits, limitations on local regulation of farming structures and practices, tax incentives to keep land in production, and special considerations in local planning and land-use decision-making.

The Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan emphasizes strategies that keep farms profitable as the most effective means of maintaining and protecting farm operations.