Rural Business Sectors

The exchange of goods and services in rural communities is a dynamic component of our regional economy. Many resource- and home-based businesses have added to the traditional economic pillars of agriculture and forestry. Self-employment and entrepreneurship have become staples of the rural economy. Over half of all self-employed workers in Tompkins County, as identified in the 2000 U.S. Census, live in the rural towns.

Activities that make up Tompkins County’s rural economy are found in municipalities with less than 150 people per square mile, in particular the Towns of Lansing, Groton, Dryden, Caroline, Danby, Newfield, Enfield, and Ulysses. This rural economy includes:

- Industries related to the production, processing, marketing, and sales of agricultural and natural resource-based products, such as timber harvesting, sawmills, maple syrup production, farmstands, fruit orchards, nurseries, wineries, fish farms, quarries, animal husbandry, dairy farms, food and herb processing, and feed, seed, and equipment dealers.
- Overnight lodging, restaurants, arts, entertainment, and recreation, such as cafes, taverns, B&Bs, retreat centers, artist studios, and golf courses.
- Small businesses, including retail, home-based, and professional services, such as construction, well drilling, computer technology, website design, consulting, cleaning services, snowplowing, landscaping, nurseries, daycare, storage facilities, seamstresses, veterinarians, recording studios, fine woodworking and carpentry, and general stores.
- Manufacturing, including turbines, women’s garments, and electronic components.

Rural Business Growth

Many of the rural areas of Tompkins County offer a high quality of life. They offer a beautiful natural environment with scenic views of natural and working landscapes, a strong sense of community built on neighbors helping neighbors, and are generally quiet, safe, comfortable places to live. Multi-generation families, community organizations, and school-based activities help to create close-knit communities. The quality of life in rural areas also attracts skilled workers employed at the more urban job centers, as well as professionals with home-based businesses and telecommuters where business location doesn’t matter.

Businesses in these areas benefit from lower land and space costs, more room for operations and easy expansion of facilities or ventures such as experimental cash crops. Rural towns provide easy access to local services and community facilities, and local banks understand small business customer needs. A localized exchange of goods and services helps keep money in the community. This exchange includes a widespread use of neighborly barter.

Business trends in the rural municipalities include a growth in agriculture in response to a desire among Tompkins County residents to buy locally grown and organically grown food. Many municipal comprehensive plans mention the desire to support the viability of agricultural operations, as well as retaining and encouraging entrepreneurs and small business owners in their communities. Service sector employment is also growing. As large firms close down, there is more focus on enhancing the viability of small firms and start up businesses. A common theme in many rural towns’ Comprehensive Plans is a desire to enhance existing commercial areas and hamlet centers by promoting existing businesses, attracting new businesses, creating jobs, and improving personal incomes and skill levels.

Challenges

The location of rural businesses comes up often in local comprehensive plans. Concerns are that commercial businesses in rural areas can create visual clutter and dangerous driveway cuts on busy roads, and that even cottage indus-