

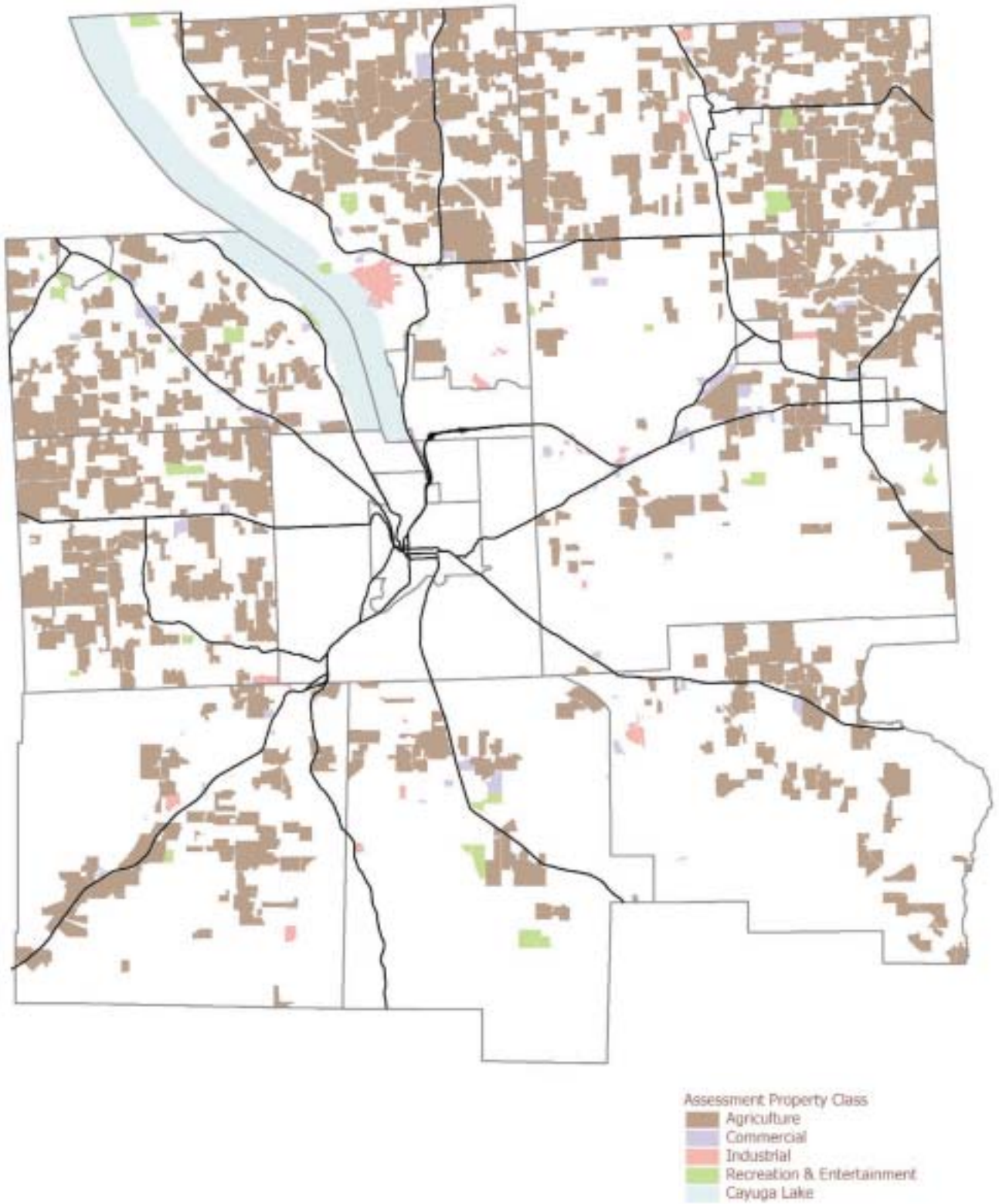
# R u r a l E c o n o m y

## **PRINCIPLE**

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The working rural landscapes of farms and forests, and the livelihoods of those who depend upon them, should be preserved and enhanced.

RURAL BUSINESS SECTORS



## 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

Self-employment and small business entrepreneurship are staples of Tompkins County's rural economy.

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-generational 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

The County's rural areas are welcoming to small businesses and offer a high quality of life.

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-

tries can have negative effects on the quality of life in residential neighborhoods. The Town of Dryden has identified approximately 40 commercial offices or retail establishments scattered outside the downtown center, mostly along the State Route 13 corridor. According to the Town’s Draft Comprehensive Plan, “In recent years this scattered development of small-scale retail and industrial enterprises has created some land use conflicts.” The Town’s plan also identifies quality-of-life impacts – such as noise, hours of operation, traffic, and light pollution – to surrounding neighborhoods.

Despite the welcoming, convenient, and lower-cost business environment in rural areas, challenges to the rural economy are many. They include:

- Lack of access to business support and assistance.
- Less federal and state financial support than in urban areas.
- Inadequate infrastructure, such as roads, water, sewer, high-speed Internet, and cable.
- Inadequate services, such as winter highway maintenance, road signage, and response time in power outages.
- Difficulty in attracting and retaining customers due to lower visibility, lower pedestrian and vehicular traffic, and travel time or conditions.
- Lack of available labor or adequate attractions for workers who might relocate.
- Higher property taxes in Tompkins County than in other rural regions.
- Threats to prime agricultural land by water and sewer infrastructure expansion projects.
- Increases in deer population that negatively impact agriculture and landscaping operations.
- Sometimes confusing development regulations as a result of each county, town, and village having its own rules, codes, fees, and officials.
- Competition from big businesses and “superstores” that carry lower priced goods.
- Degradation of rural character due to more traffic, sprawl, reduction in natural beauty.
- Regional population loss, especially the loss of young adults.

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

Rural economies face challenges from lack of ready access to infrastructure, capital, and business support services.

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.<sup>6</sup> Many more people are employed in farm-related jobs, such as transporting and processing farm

The loss of productive farmland, and of farms in general, is often permanent.

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

<sup>6</sup> 1997 Census of Agriculture

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 in the County.

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,

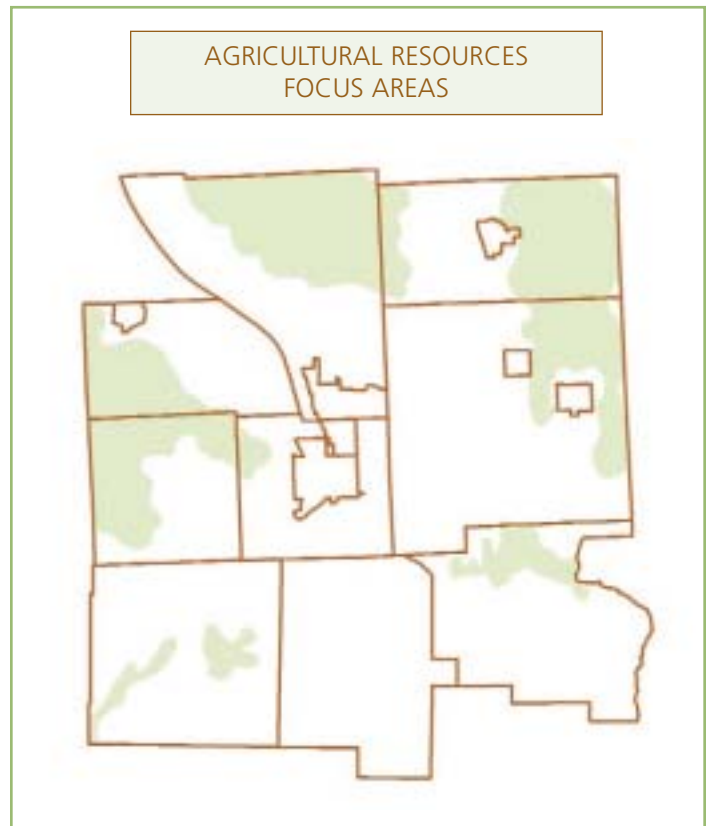
Agricultural districts form the foundation of farmland protection efforts.

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.

Prepared in 1998, the plan recommends strategies in three major areas: agricultural economic development, education, and government policies.

In 2002, the County evaluated using a voluntary conservation easement program to protect agricultural lands. The study identified several areas of the county as strategic in terms of keeping agriculture viable and thriving. These Agricultural Resources Focus Areas, identified on the map, have the best soils and high concentrations of contiguous, actively farmed parcels of land. In 2004, Tompkins County was awarded state funds to purchase a farmland conservation easement for the long-term protection of a 433-acre farm in one of these focus areas.



## Policies

When considering rural economic development strategies, income enhancement may be just as important as job creation. If we can better nurture the entrepreneurial spirit of rural business owners, there is a greater potential to enhance the incomes of rural residents and increase the standards of living in our rural areas. Filling the gaps in capital and technical expertise needed to support more successful rural businesses will strengthen rural communities. It is also important to preserve and manage the economic and ecological functions of the rural landscapes in ways that are sustainable for agriculture, forestry, recreation, tourism, and maintaining a rural way of life. By encouraging development patterns intended to preserve open space, agricultural land and forest areas, we can protect the beauty and natural environment that make rural living desirable.

### It is the policy of Tompkins County to:

- 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 private timber harvesting, agri-tourism, and home businesses, 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 Comprehensive Plan.
- Encourage development that is designed to preserve open space and valuable agricultural and forest land.

## Action Items

*Action items are activities that Tompkins County government or community partners can undertake to implement policies.*

### TO DO

Determine the feasibility of a rural micro-enterprise program, including adding a component to the County's Economic Development Revolving Loan Fund.

### TO DO

Provide small-business skill development targeted to the needs of rural enterprises.

### TO DO

Update the Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan with a particular focus on promoting the viability and profitability of agriculture within the County.

### TO DO

Encourage procurement of goods from local farms for use in County facilities and programs that purchase and/or distribute food products.

### TO DO

Establish an open space program to protect or preserve agriculture and forest land in the focus areas identified in the Comprehensive Plan using tools appropriate to the functions of those resources.

### TO DO

Develop or identify model performance standards to preserve agriculture and forest land.