

Interlocking Pieces: Housing, Transportation, and Jobs



Housing Choices

PRINCIPLE

Housing in Tompkins County should be affordable and appealing to all residents, regardless of their income or whether they rent or own their homes.

The High Cost of Housing

Housing in Tompkins County differs in many ways from its neighboring counties, and even from state and national averages. Barely half the homes here are owner-occupied, as opposed to two-thirds nationwide. The average homeownership rates in the counties surrounding Tompkins are even higher, ranging from 64 percent in Cortland County to 79 percent in Tioga County.

The sales price of a single-family home in Tompkins County has soared in the last few years, from a median of \$100,00 in 2000 to \$134,000 in 2003.⁵ The cost of buying a home here is 50 to 75 percent higher than it is across the county line, in any direction.

Many people in Tompkins County rent their living space, but this also comes at a premium. The median monthly rental rate per household in 2000 was \$611, the highest in the region.

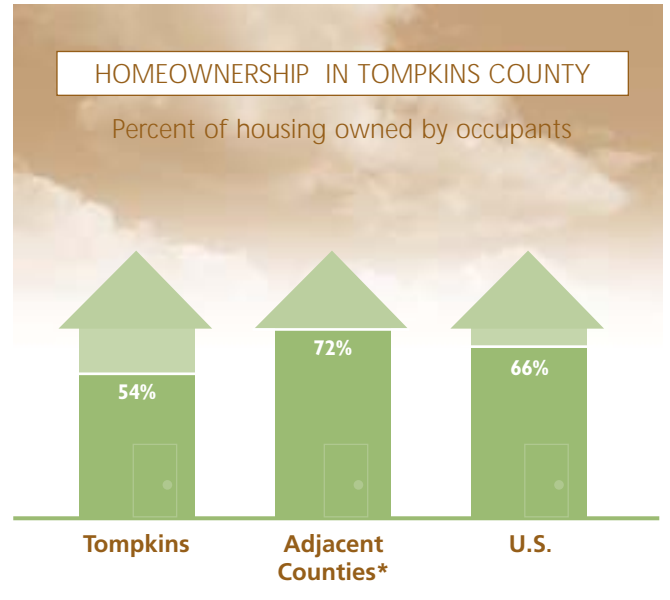
A limited supply of housing stock has resulted in hot competition among buyers, which has pushed home prices up. New housing construction, at a median of \$180,000, is generally not affordable to the average household, and there is little incentive for contractors to develop affordable housing.

Tompkins County's low vacancy rates for rental units – 4.6 percent countywide, about half that in adjacent counties,

The cost of buying or renting a home in Tompkins County is the highest in our seven-county region.

and 2.6 percent in the City of Ithaca – create competition for available units and help inflate prices. The large student population in the county impacts the rental market, particularly near the colleges. A group of four students, for instance, can pool their resources for more purchasing power than a family household.

The number of households is increasing, adding to competition for homes. From 1990 to 2000, the number of separate – and especially one-person – households here went up by nearly 10 percent, while the population grew by a modest 2.6 percent. Senior citizens are living longer and showing a preference to stay in their homes, another factor that reduces turnover in the market.



*Cayuga 72%
Chemung 69%
Cortland 64%
Schuyler 77%
Seneca 74%
Tioga 78%

Source: U.S. Census 2000

HOUSING COSTS		
To rent ¹		To own ²
\$611	Tompkins	\$134,000
\$468	Tioga	\$90,000
\$493	Chemung	\$77,900
\$521	Seneca	\$76,900
\$482	Cayuga	\$76,500
\$471	Cortland	\$75,250
\$466	Schuyler	\$79,000

¹ Median monthly rent (2000)

² Median residential sales price (2003)

Sources: U.S. Census 2000;
NYS Association of Realtors

⁵ New York State Association of Realtors

Barriers to Affordability

Owning a home is widely recognized as one of the most effective ways for Americans to build wealth, but Tompkins County’s high-priced housing market makes it difficult for moderate- and low-income families to take advantage of homeownership as a step toward economic security. The high cost of rental housing also prohibits many households from saving for a down payment.

The generally accepted definition of “affordable” is that a household should pay no more than 30 percent of its annual income on housing. Almost one in three households in Tompkins County has housing affordability problems.

The median income in Tompkins County is \$37,272 per year, differing little from that of surrounding counties, with more than a quarter of all households in the county earning

About one in three households in Tompkins County has housing affordability problems.

less than \$20,000 a year. Over 10,000 households pay more than 30 percent of their income on housing; over 5,000 spend more than half their income on housing. This cost burden is most acute for low-income renters, many of whom are not students. Among non-student renters, nearly 40 percent – close to 4,000 households – pay more than the affordable level for housing.

Rapidly increasing housing costs may be pushing the low-income households out of the market altogether. Homeless shelter rates are the highest they have been in over a decade, and more pressure is being placed on housing assistance providers and social service programs that assist low-income households.

In-Commuters

Tompkins County is a regional job center that attracts employees from throughout the region. The 2000 U.S. Census shows 2,846 workers driving here from Tioga County; 2,605 from Cortland County; 1,814 from Cayuga County; and 1,603 from Schuyler County. The number of in-commuters from the six counties surrounding Tompkins in 2000 totaled 13,737.

The number of people commuting into Tompkins County for work has increased by 2,531 since 1990. Some of the increase may be due to declining job opportunities in sur-

rounding counties, and/or workers may have family ties and other obligations that keep them from moving closer to their jobs. However, it is widely presumed that many who commute to Tompkins County would live here if they could afford to.

The link between housing costs and in-commuting has other consequences, as well. Long commutes cause additional wear and tear to the highway infrastructure, add to air pollution, and cause a faster rate of consumption of non-renewable energy sources.

Senior and Special Needs Housing

Affordable housing is an especially acute need for senior citizens. In 2000, about one-tenth (9,257) of County residents were over age 65, an increase of 10 percent in the last decade. Because of better health care and increasing longevity rates, this group will continue to age and add to housing needs. In just a few years, the baby boom generation will start turning 65, with the “big bulge” coming between 2010 and 2020. This dramatic increase in the number of senior citizens will place tremendous pressure on housing.

Most seniors want to stay in their homes – or “age in place” – as long as they can. As the oldest group ages, its members are showing a strong preference for receiving per-

Affordability of assisted living facilities and services is a major issue for many seniors.

sonal care services in a residential environment rather than a health care setting. Assisted living is the fastest growing and fastest changing sector of senior housing. Private-pay assisted living units have been added to the market, but there is a lack of subsidized units for seniors needing personal care.

As people age, their incomes tend to decline. Affordability of assisted living facilities and services is a major issue for many seniors. Currently, all of the facilities that provide high levels of care are high-end options.

Two other residential needs in Tompkins County are permanent housing for individuals needing ongoing, on-site services to be able to live in the community, and housing – such as a single-room occupancy (SRO) community residence – for the homeless mentally ill.

Assuring Housing Choice

Tompkins County lacks an adequate supply of affordable housing. Households are spending too much on housing, and both renters and homeowners are cost burdened. The increasing purchase prices and rental rates are pushing the lowest income households out of the market and leaving them to rely on subsidies, substandard or crowded housing, or other strategies such as leaving the county.

Barriers to the creation of new affordable housing include the comparatively lower return on investment of affordable

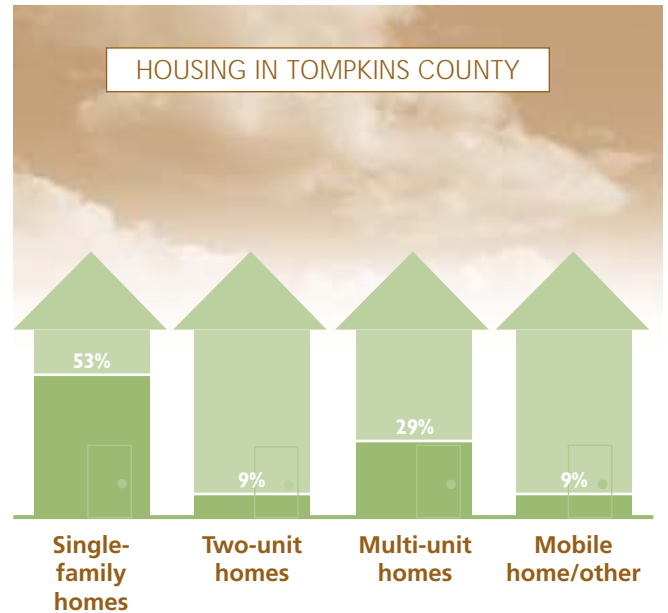
Tompkins County lacks an adequate supply of affordable housing.

housing projects. Local zoning and building codes may also increase the costs of construction of affordable housing.

Another impediment is the perception that affordable housing will lower adjoining property values and bring with it a host of undesirable characteristics such as drug use and crime. Recent attempts to develop affordable, multi-family housing in Tompkins County have been met with considerable community opposition, based on this perception. However, there is no statistical link between affordable housing and diminishing property values or increasing crime rates. Residents of affordable housing are usually working people, known to the community.

Changes in household size and household make-up will necessitate a variety of housing options in the future. The increasing number of single-person households, the preference for young couples to wait to have children, and the increase in the over-65 population will all impact the types of housing our communities will need. In the meantime, the current widespread lack of affordable housing hampers the local economy by reducing expenditures on other items, narrowing choices for workers coming here from other areas, and preventing young families or householders from building wealth through homeownership.

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Source: U.S. Census 2000

TOMPKINS COUNTY HOUSING FACTS

Occupied housing units in 2000	36,420
Housing units added since 1990	3,287
Rental units in 2000	16,846
Rental units added since 1990	1,935
Mobile homes in 2000	3,671
Mobile homes added since 1990	68
Increase in number of one-person households since 1990	30%
Homes in the county built before 1940	40%
Homes in City of Ithaca built before 1940	82%
Homes showing need for extensive or moderate repairs	9%
Households that spend more than 30 percent of income on housing	40%
Households that spend more than half of income on housing	20%

Policies

By encouraging changes in how housing is provided, we can assure housing choices that are affordable and appealing to all residents.

It is the policy of Tompkins County to:

- Provide for a variety of quality living experiences, including rural, suburban, hamlet, village, and urban.
- Protect consumers' housing options throughout the County by providing a mix of choices of location, accessibility, housing types, and neighborhood character.
- Provide and encourage more quality rental and owner-occupied affordable housing options for very low-, low-, and moderate-income residents.
- Promote increased owner-occupied housing in the County.
- Maintain an adequate supply of affordable housing options for people with special needs, including seniors who wish to remain in their homes and persons requiring health care, custodial care, or supportive services.
- Promote housing opportunities for locally-employed persons who would prefer to live in Tompkins County.

Action Items

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

- TO DO** → Produce a three- to five-year affordable-housing needs assessment to use as a basis to guide development of appropriate subsidized rental and ownership housing to meet local needs.
- TO DO** → Develop efforts to coordinate available services for seniors who are having difficulty identifying or accessing those services needed to stay in their homes.
- TO DO** → Conduct a survey of in-commuters to determine the reasons they live outside of Tompkins County.
- TO DO** → Develop or identify model regulations and guidelines that incorporate universal design elements for new residential construction that meet the needs of many future residents, including families with small children and mobility impaired persons, and provide related training for elected officials, board members, staff and the public.
- TO DO** → Develop model provisions for land development regulations that encourage affordable housing.
- TO DO** → Provide education and training programs for elected officials, board members, community leaders, developers and builders, and the general public on the need for and benefits of affordable-housing development.
- TO DO** → Survey subsidized affordable housing units to determine when subsidies expire and if the units are likely to remain affordable. Establish a program to monitor the status of those units to anticipate impending deficiencies.
- TO DO** → Build a new Community Residence – Single Room Occupancy mental health facility.
- TO DO** → Inventory and track the availability of affordable senior housing options that provide custodial care services.

PRINCIPLE

The functional capacity of the highway system should be maintained; the capacity and participation rates for transportation alternatives—including public transit, pedestrian and bicycling facilities—should be enhanced.

The Growing Stress on Our Transportation Systems

Transportation issues are ubiquitous, ranging from a neighborhood wanting a stop sign at a busy intersection to land-use policies that can reduce the use of automobiles. Whatever the scale, every individual in our community is affected by transportation choices.

Transportation infrastructure, including highways and public transit, represents a huge and ongoing public investment. New York State, Tompkins County, and local municipalities struggle to maintain the existing network of roads, bridges, and public transit. Annual transportation expenditures by all levels of government within Tompkins County total about \$35 million.

At the same time, stresses on our transportation systems continue to grow. Low-density suburban and rural development patterns add to the length of trips and the number of

Tompkins County is notable for its high use of modes of transportation other than the single occupancy automobile.

vehicles on the road, resulting in increased traffic, congestion, and wear and tear on the infrastructure. This spread-out pattern of development, leading residents to live further from daily destinations and conveniences, typically lacks pedestrian and bicycle facilities that encourage physical activity and healthier lifestyles.

The geography of Tompkins County results in regional and intrastate traffic being funneled through the City of Ithaca. When this pass-through traffic is added to the already high volume of local traffic, it limits the effectiveness of strategies to channel vehicles away from urban neighborhoods in order to help maintain their livability.

On the other hand, Tompkins County is notable for its relatively high use of modes of transportation other than the single occupancy automobile, which may indicate that increased use of alternative modes of transportation is viable here.

Census numbers for 2000 show that 18 percent of Tompkins County residents either walked or rode a bike to work.

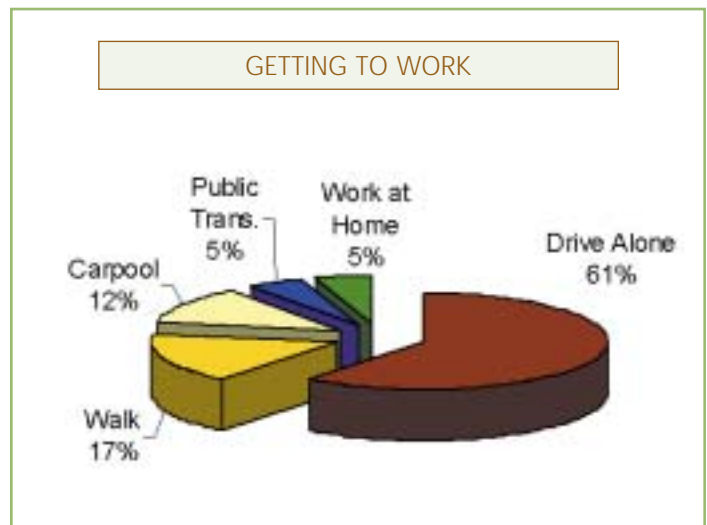
How We Get Around

Studying the work trip is a good way to gauge how a community gets around. The 2000 Census reported that 60 percent of the total commuters (and 69 percent of non-students) in the county drove alone to work, as compared to 75 percent nationwide. Fully 40 percent of commuters used alternative modes of transportation, compared to only 25 percent nationwide. Tompkins County also has higher percentages of residents using public transportation, carpooling, walking, and working at home than in New York State as a whole. Non-automobile use is higher in the City of Ithaca and other areas where development is compact. Typically, if people need to walk more than 5 to 10 minutes to reach a destination, they choose to drive. Since low-density suburban and strip mall developments rarely are located within 10 minute walks of destinations, these types of development patterns result in increased traffic and congestion.

According to several indications, bicycle use is increasing in Ithaca and its environs. One measure is the number of bicycles people put on the public transit buses. Every Tompkins Consolidated Area Transit bus is equipped with a rack on the front to carry two bicycles at a time. The racks were used for 16,000 individual trips in 2002.

Census numbers for 2000 show that 18 percent of Tompkins County residents either walked or rode a bike to work. Public input on transportation issues often focuses on the desire for more and better opportunities to walk, bike, and take public transit. All this leads one to the conclusion that more emphasis should be placed locally on alternatives to cars.

Our highway corridors are critical to the economy of Tompkins County. They are the routes used by in-commuters and by virtually all freight service bringing goods into the community and taking locally manufactured items to other



Source: U.S. Census 2000

We can reduce automobile traffic and support alternative modes of transportation by encouraging compact development.

markets. Highway function is diminishing, however, as development extends along the major roadways.

Much commercial development, in particular, has occurred as unrelated, dispersed establishments. As a result, each tends to have two or more driveway cuts with few facilities to promote driver or pedestrian access between establishments. This development pattern places a strain on the functionality of the regional highway system. The primary function of arterial highways, which is to move traffic on a regional level, becomes more and more tied up with local traffic access to individual establishments along the length of the highway. If development patterns continue as they have – and as they are permitted by local zoning regulations – the functioning of our major highways will diminish. This will lead to more traffic congestion, longer commutes, and, in general, more time spent in vehicles. In addition, people with limited access to automotive transportation, such as teenagers, senior citizens, and the physically challenged, will be effectively excluded from these areas.

We can reduce automobile traffic and support alternative modes of transportation by encouraging compact development and by providing affordable housing near employment centers. Doing so will not only promote livable communities, but it will also keep overall transportation maintenance costs down. Even now, caring for our transportation network is a significant cost to taxpayers. If we continue to expand this infrastructure beyond existing population centers, these costs will continue to rise.

Policies

Improving facilities for multiple modes of transportation, and focusing development in ways that reduce traffic generation and best utilize existing infrastructure networks, may be the only way we can hope to maintain a safe and functional system to provide mobility for access to jobs, goods, and services. Recognizing that most residents and travelers will continue to rely on the automobile, we need to maintain the functional capacity of our highway infrastructure by making investments in technology and design that increase the efficiency of the existing network. Additions or major modifications to the network should be made only selectively, and should be limited to those areas where transportation issues cannot adequately be addressed by other means. At the same time, we need to build the efficiency and participation rates for alternatives including transit, pedestrians and bicycling in order to limit the stress on our existing highway network.

It is the policy of Tompkins County to:

- Preserve and maintain the design function and safety of the existing road network while making investments in technology and design that increase its operating efficiency.
- Make selective additions or modifications to the highway network to address capacity limitations that cannot otherwise be addressed.
- Coordinate land use and infrastructure planning to facilitate the use of multiple modes of transportation and to ensure that development occurs in a manner that maintains the design function of the road network.
- Enhance and promote the use of bicycles and walking as viable forms of transportation by supporting the provision of safe public facilities, including multi-use trails, bicycle routes, bicycle lanes, and sidewalks.
- Enhance transportation options and provide facilities that allow passengers to transfer easily and safely from one mode of transportation to another (e.g., biking to bus service).
- Provide affordable and accessible public transportation to important destinations among outlying nodes, the Ithaca urban area, and points outside the County.
- Promote a transportation system that supports nodal, compact development patterns and reduces negative environmental impacts.

Action Items

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

- TO DO** → Develop a bicycle suitability map for Tompkins County.*
- TO DO** → Evaluate and implement transit stop improvements and a detailed transit passenger information system.*
- TO DO** → Identify infill opportunities at nodes along transit lines.*
- TO DO** → Determine feasibility of implementing a car sharing program in Tompkins County.*
- TO DO** → Develop a County-wide State Route 13 Corridor Plan.*
- TO DO** → Develop a traffic signal upgrade and intersection evaluation program.*
- TO DO** → Develop a centralized, uniform accident reporting system.*
- TO DO** → Conduct transportation infrastructure needs assessments for roadways, transit, bicycles, and pedestrians.*
- TO DO** → Facilitate municipal review of local development regulations to address future performance of the transportation system.*
- TO DO** → Implement recommendations in the Freight Transportation Study to minimize negative aspects of freight transportation, while increasing safety.*

PRINCIPLE

The local economy should be enhanced by building on important community assets, such as a highly educated workforce, an entrepreneurial spirit, dynamic academic institutions, and a high quality of life.

Our Education-Centered Economy

Tompkins County is a regional employment center anchored and stabilized by its largest employer, Cornell University. As host to a thriving higher education sector, the community is an attractive location for technological, creative, and information-related enterprises. The quality of life in the community is greatly enhanced by the human, cultural and economic resources of higher education institutions and the students and staff they attract.

Our education-dominated economy has experienced job growth at a rate that exceeds most of the rest of Upstate New York, which has contributed to a high incidence of in-commuting. The educated workforce and high quality of life have contributed to that growth. On the other hand, the typically low unemployment rate in Tompkins County is in part a statistical anomaly created by the large student population. This characteristic often disguises chronic community problems, such as underemployment and poverty.

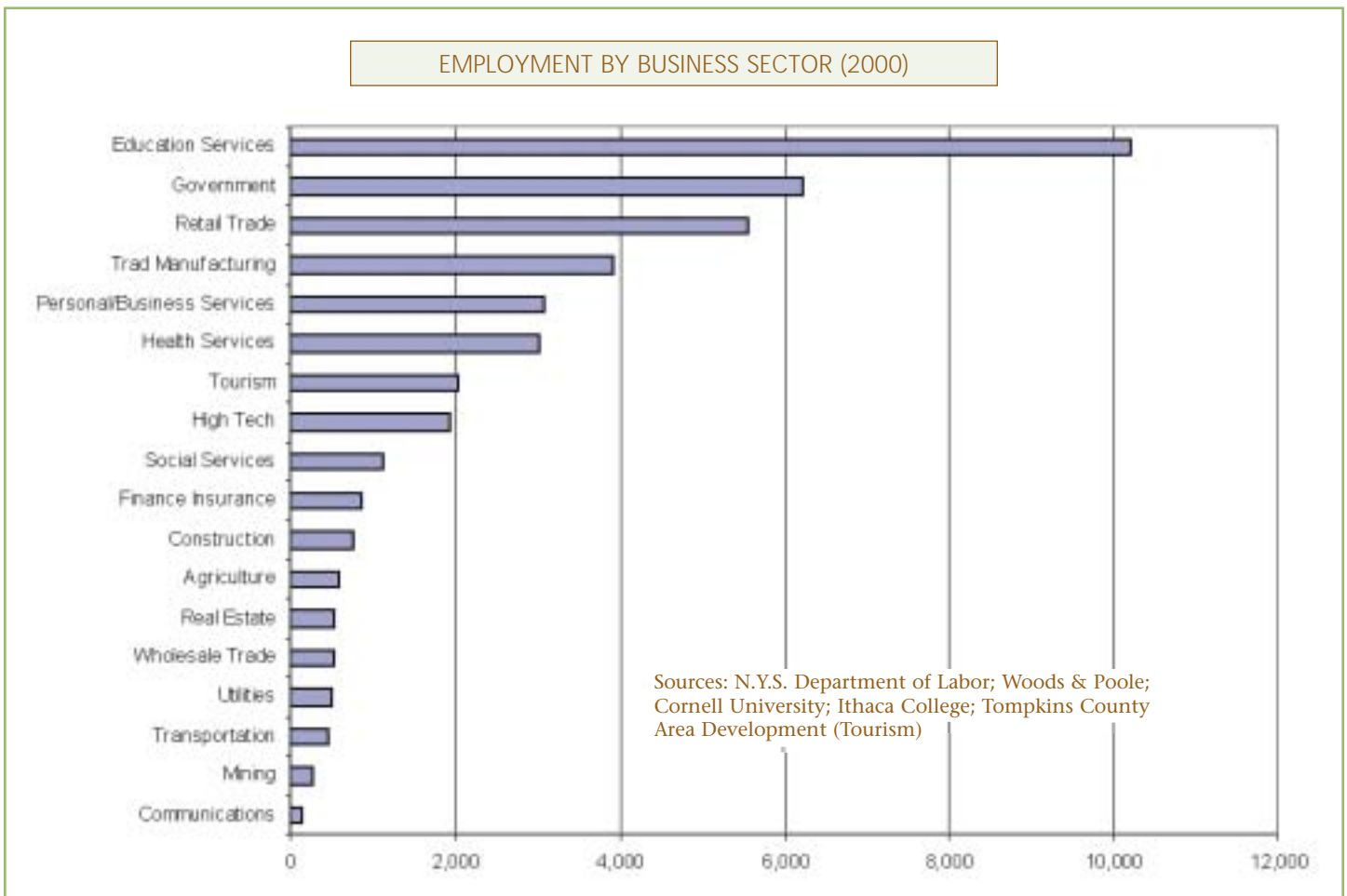
The Local Economic Picture

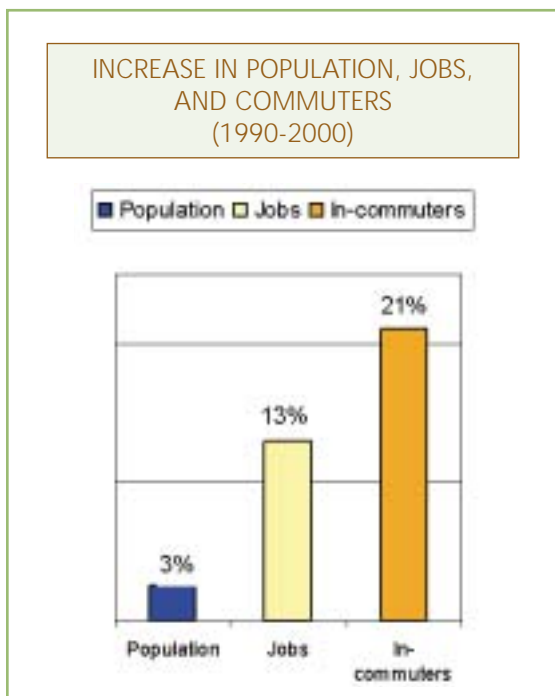
A picture of the local economy will help us know where we are going and how to get there. In recent years, the economy

here has had ups and downs, similar to the rest of the nation. After a period of moderate and steady growth in the 1980s, Tompkins County’s economy – like most others in Upstate – declined or was stagnant from 1991 to 1997. A spurt of robust growth from 1998 to 2000 was followed by relatively flat growth from 2001 to 2002 during the national recession. Tompkins County came out of that recession more quickly than much of the rest of the U.S. The county saw close to 2 percent growth in employment from 2002 to 2003, while the U.S. and New York State continued to lose jobs.

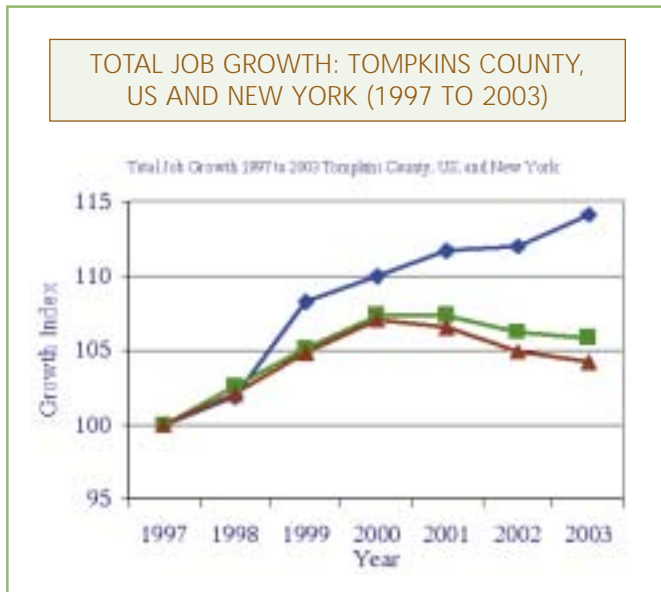
The economic growth or decline of a region depends on the outside demand for its products. The economic engine of a region – its economic base – lies with the “export” sectors that sell products and services to others outside the region. Our exports include education, manufactured goods, high-tech products and services, and tourism.

Tompkins County is home to three colleges: Cornell University, Ithaca College, and Tompkins Cortland Community College. The higher education sector accounts for 20 percent of the county’s gross product and nearly 40 percent of its economic base. While it is not a high-growth sector, the size and resource value of education helps it maintain its central importance in the economy.





Sources: N.Y.S. Department of Labor; U.S. Census 2000



Sources: N.Y.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; N.Y.S. Department of Labor

Higher education is the largest industry in Tompkins County.

Traditional manufacturing follows in importance, generating about 15 percent of the county’s gross product and almost 30 percent of the economic base. Although restructuring and closure of several large firms reduced employment during the 1980s, strong entrepreneurial activity and a turnaround in the motor vehicles and equipment industries revitalized this sector in the 1990s. Manufacturing, a critical sector, is vulnerable to shrinkage in the local economy. In the midst of a serious loss of manufacturing jobs in the U.S. as a whole, Tompkins County’s loss has been much slower. The county’s 7 percent dip in manufacturing employment from 1999 to 2003 is considerably lower than the nearly 19 percent loss of manufacturing jobs nationwide in the same time period.

Our other export sectors are high tech industries – for example, electronics, software, bio-technology, and research – as well as utilities, agriculture, and tourism. Of these, the

The technology sector of our economy has the most potential to expand.

technology sector has the strongest growth trend and the most potential to expand, having provided over 10 percent of the local economic base in 2000.

Agriculture and tourism, although relatively small sectors of our economy, contribute in many ways to the quality of life. Farmers maintain 30 percent of the county’s land. After many years of decline, the dairy sector stabilized in the late 1990s, and small, innovative farm operations that fill niche markets are bringing new vitality to this sector. Tourism is valued for its support of cultural and commercial resources, such as the Farmer’s Market, our historic districts, unique shops and restaurants, Discovery Trail museums, parks and natural attractions, and arts and entertainment venues. The reduction of international travel since September 11, 2001 has enhanced local tourism growth.

The County’s Economic Development Strategy

In 1999, Tompkins County Area Development (TCAD) released Tompkins County’s first economic development strategy. The strategy, which combined comprehensive input from community leaders with extensive research and analysis, points the way to greater economic vitality, stability, diversity, and equity.

The Economic Development Strategy is organized around three main goals:

- Build on the economic foundations of Tompkins County. This effort includes strengthening and enhancing our workforce, infrastructure, business resources, and other community resources such as housing, arts, and daycare.
- Create employment and business opportunities. The conventional core of economic development work includes retention, expansion, and start-up support of businesses, with a focus on export industries. It also includes targeted attraction of new businesses and industries to our area. Key sectors are education, manufacturing, high tech, agriculture, and tourism.
- Reflect community values in the economic development process. The importance of our collective community values was regularly expressed during the strategy planning process. Top concerns are: creating opportunity for all; working cooperatively with business, governments, and civic groups as appropriate; building on the county's existing assets; and evaluating economic development work to optimize investments.

Many of the Economic Development Strategy partners are updating their organizational plans. An update of the strategy, planned for late 2004, will be grounded in those efforts. A key element is a renewed workforce development effort to ensure that the needs of unemployed, underemployed, and

Work that lies ahead includes strengthening workforce development, broadening university and college based development, and expanding resources for business development.

employers are met through job creation, training, and other employment programs.

In recognition that the education sector is central to our overall economic health, and that the community's economic development system is an integral part of keeping the education institutions vital, cooperative initiatives will be pursued. Future efforts will include working more closely with Cornell University on the feasibility of a business attraction initiative using specific Cornell research and development programs.

Other economic initiatives planned for the near future are to continue to work for State Empire Zone status for

Tompkins County and to explore regional partnerships to share underutilized economic development resources. In the context of national trends and changes in regional air service, it is also important to continue to explore ways to improve the cost and convenience of air service for county employers, visitors, and local residents.

Policies

Economic development efforts in Tompkins County have focused on creating jobs that offer good wages and benefits, supplying the labor force needs of local employers, enhancing the quality of life attributes that assist employers in outside recruitment and employee retention, and maintaining the community infrastructure necessary to retain our status as a regional employment center in Upstate New York.

It is the policy of Tompkins County to:

- Provide a setting where businesses, particularly locally owned ones, can flourish by enhancing the county's natural resources, arts and culture, lively urban core, and vital neighborhoods.
- Support economic development that provides quality employment opportunities to local residents, good wages and benefits, and affordable goods and services.
- Support tourism in the area by encouraging local institutions, businesses, and facilities to better plan, coordinate, and expand tourism-related activities.
- Enhance transportation options, including freight and air service, to support business development, while preserving the integrity of existing communities.
- Work closely with the local institutions of higher learning to enhance those institutions' significant and integral contributions to the local economy and community life.

Action Items

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

TO DO

Complete the workforce development plan, ensuring that the needs of unemployed and underemployed are met by job creation activities, and the needs of employers are met by employment and training programs.

TO DO

Enhance the ability to analyze costs and benefits of projects as well as improve post-project job data collection to ensure that the public purpose of projects is realized.

TO DO

Continue to lobby for State Empire Zone status and explore regional partnerships to share underutilized economic development resources.

TO DO

Continue to explore ways to improve the cost and convenience of air service for County employers, visitors, and local residents.

TO DO

Work with Cornell University to improve technology transfer.

TO DO

Study feasibility of a business attraction initiative using specific Cornell University research and development programs as the key element.

TO DO

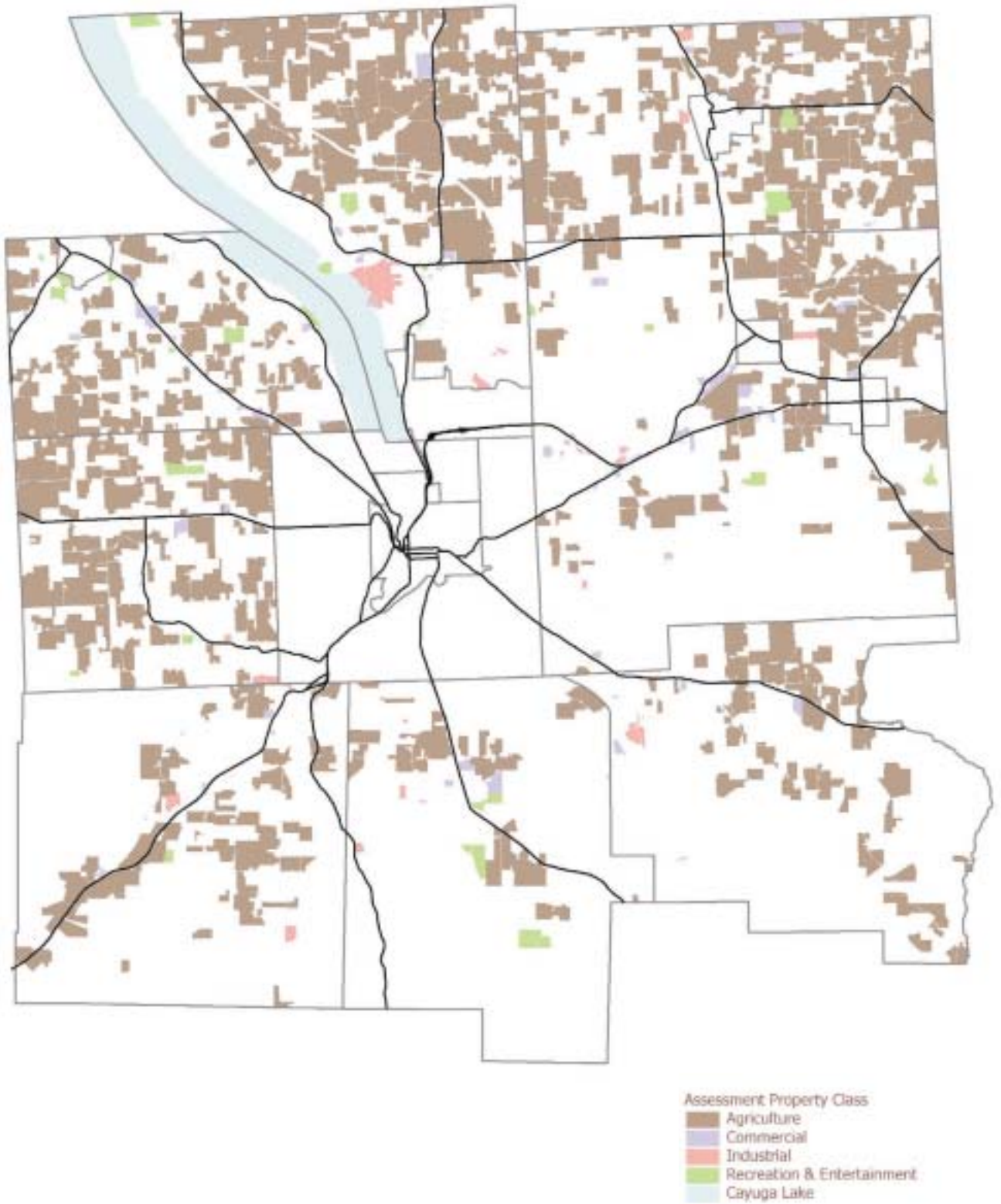
Promote and develop the county's tourism attractions including the Cayuga Lake Scenic Byway.

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

PRINCIPLE

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.⁶ 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

⁶ 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,

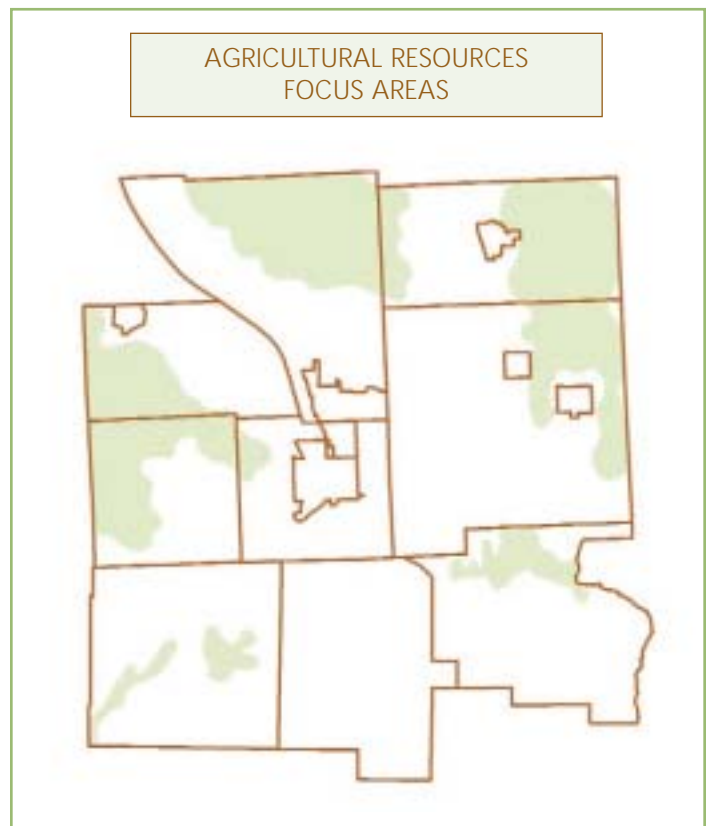
Agricultural districts form the foundation of farmland protection efforts.

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.