

Introduction

The Value of a Comprehensive Plan

When we think of places we have visited or lived, some stand out as models of natural beauty and human comfort, supported by thriving local economies. The most satisfying places to live, work, and raise families are communities that meet the needs of commerce and individual expression while protecting and conserving the natural environment and non-renewable resources.

“Ideal” communities do not grow by accident or without public debate and agreed-upon guidelines. Collaborative planning processes and Comprehensive Plans are the building blocks of such great communities.

Planning helps maintain and promote livable, vital communities. Local municipalities play a key role by developing and implementing comprehensive plans that reflect their own goals. The County Comprehensive Plan provides an opportunity to coordinate these efforts and create a shared community vision.

The content of the Plan was developed from issues citizens identified as critical. It describes existing conditions, identifies strengths and weaknesses, and outlines strategies that can inform decision-makers at all levels of government, as well as individuals, businesses, educational institutions, and not-for-profit organizations as they plan for the future of Tompkins County.

Regional Cooperation

An over-arching principle of the County Comprehensive Plan is that Tompkins County will work proactively with towns, villages, the City of Ithaca, and State and Federal agencies to cooperatively address regional issues, such as natural resources, public infrastructure, and consumer and employment markets.

The Plan outlines ways the community can address regional and intermunicipal issues that may not be included in local planning efforts. Although New York State clearly places land use authority in the hands of its towns, villages, and cities, it also specifically recognizes that intermunicipal

planning is needed to cooperatively address regional issues.

The State encourages the development of county comprehensive plans to address development and preservation issues that transcend local political boundaries. Regional issues addressed in the Comprehensive Plan include natural resources, public infrastructure, and markets such as housing and employment.

Listening to Community Voices

The groundwork for the Comprehensive Plan started in 2001 with the County Planning Department’s Vital Communities

Initiative, a two year effort to fully involve the community in defining a broad vision of how, where, and what kind of development should occur in the future. The impetus for the Initiative came from concerns expressed by local organizations, national awareness of the need to combat sprawl and improve communities, and recognition of the need to improve the quality of life for the County’s citizens.

The intent of the Vital Communities Initiative was to recognize the diversity of communities, lifestyles, and interests in our County and beyond, and to provide citizens and community leaders

with a planning process to articulate their vision for the future of the county. Through participatory workshops and public presentations, a set of interim development and preservation principles was developed. These interim principles were adopted by the County Legislature in 2002.

The next step was to develop the purpose statement and determine the content of the Comprehensive Plan. In the winter of 2002-2003, Planning Department staff gave presentations and gathered input at five meetings for the general public and ten for community groups. In the summer and fall of 2003, staff reviewed existing documents and researched and analyzed the various elements of the plan.

At this printing (April 2004), the Plan is at the draft review stage and is being presented to the public for feedback and comment at community groups, advisory boards, open houses, and public meetings. After this public outreach effort, the plan will be revised based on the comments

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received. The County Planning Department will also conduct a fiscal impact analysis of the recommendations and develop an implementation plan for the key action items.

Coordinating with Other Plans

Development of the Comprehensive Plan included review of more than 70 existing plans of local municipalities, adjoining counties, and State agencies, as well as meetings with representatives of relevant governments and public agencies to discuss regional planning issues. The County’s Plan seeks to build on and coordinate recommendations from a variety of functional plans developed on the county and regional level to address economic, transportation, and natural resources issues. Among the plans reviewed are the following:

- Tompkins County Economic Development Strategy
- Tompkins County Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan
- Better Housing for Tompkins County Strategic Plan
- Ithaca-Tompkins County Transportation Council Long Range Transportation Plan
- Cayuga Lake Waterfront Plan
- Cayuga Lake Watershed Restoration and Protection Plan
- Tompkins County Agricultural Lands and Natural Areas Preservation Feasibility Study
- Building Greenways for Tompkins County

The groundwork for the Comprehensive Plan started with the Vital Communities Initiative.

Principles of the Comprehensive Plan

The Comprehensive Plan is organized around ten basic interlocking principles. The principles incorporate elements of the Vital Communities Initiative, adhere to the values expressed in Tompkins County’s mission statement, and reflect the wisdom gathered from many community opinions.

Corresponding to these principles are various policies and action items Tompkins County government, and others, can apply to meet many of the community goals expressed in the Plan. Policies and action items are shown in each section of the Plan.

The principles, which fall under four broad headings, are shown here:

REGIONAL COOPERATION

- Tompkins County will work proactively with towns, villages, the City of Ithaca, and State and Federal agencies, to cooperatively address regional issues, such as natural resources, public infrastructure, and consumer and employment markets.

HOUSING, TRANSPORTATION, AND JOBS

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

THE ENVIRONMENT

- Finite resources that provide needed community goods, services, recreational opportunities or environmental benefits should be protected and used appropriately.
- Natural features that define the community should be preserved and enhanced.

NEIGHBORHOODS AND COMMUNITIES

- Tompkins County residents should be safe, healthy, and comfortable with the aesthetics of their communities, and have daily opportunities to interact with neighbors and community members to build strong, cohesive communities.
- The development patterns reflected in the existing villages, hamlets and the City of Ithaca’s downtown area and neighborhoods are key components of the built environment and greatly contribute to the vitality of the local economy and community life.
- The effectiveness of taxpayer dollars should be maximized by investing government funds in public infrastructure and facilities in the most efficient manner possible.