

Tompkins County  
Comprehensive Plan

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April, 2004

Planning  
*for our* Future

**DRAFT**

**The mission** of the Tompkins County Legislature is to collectively meet the needs of our residents and communities and to realize the Legislators' articulated vision. County government may perform those functions not provided as well by individuals, the private sector, other levels of government, or the not-for-profit sector. County activities will be designed to protect and enhance the lives of the County's diverse residents and communities in ways that are compassionate, ethical, and creative within the limits of what residents financially support.

### To this end, we will:

1. Allocate fiscal resources consistent with our vision, goals, policies, and community needs.
2. Foster open and honest communication among governments and County residents and employees. County government will initiate dialogue on the community needs, the appropriate role of County government, and level of satisfaction with the County's direction, initiatives, and services.
3. Create and implement policies that:
  - Enhance the economic opportunity and well-being of all County residents.
  - Safeguard the health, safety, and rights of our residents and employees.
  - Protect the natural environment for future generations and maintain the built environment.
  - Prevent the need for more costly future services.
4. Encourage and support programs that:
  - Achieve the County's goals.
  - Deliver needed services.
  - Serve vulnerable populations.
  - Strengthen families and communities.

# Tompkins County Comprehensive Plan

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April, 2004

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DRAFT  
Tompkins County  
Comprehensive Plan

Prepared by  
Tompkins County Department of Planning  
Ithaca, New York  
April 2004

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Place holder for acknowledgements

# 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

An over-arching principle of the 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.

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.





# Tompkins County Overview

Located in the Finger Lakes Region of Central New York, Tompkins County contains an uncommon mixture of spectacular natural features, a vibrant urban center, internationally renowned academic institutions, and a productive and attractive working landscape. With its mixture of urban, suburban, and rural landscapes, Tompkins County offers a diverse living environment.

Tompkins County is an area of remarkable beauty in which a disproportionate quantity of worldly culture has taken root. These two elements have defined the County since Cornell University was established in 1865 as an institution where “any person can find instruction in any study.”<sup>1</sup> The County’s glacier-carved geology, its place in the growth of the new American nation, and the strength of its enterprises and industries have all contributed to its unique character.

<sup>1</sup> Ezra Cornell

## History of Settlement

While most who live here now may feel our history began with the first settlers to arrive in the wake of the American Revolution, the generations of previous residents stretch back to the Stone Age. Archeological evidence suggests the first humans to set foot in Upstate New York were nomadic hunters who, thousands of years ago, roamed the forests in search of game.

More recently, this area was home to the Cayuga Indians, one of the five – and later six – tribes that made up the Iroquois Confederation. The Cayugas used the land lightly, placing semi-permanent settlements near the sources of fresh water, cultivating produce and orchards. In 1779 General George Washington, concerned that the Iroquois nations would ally with the British, sent troops into Iroquoia to drive the Indians west and out of the conflict raging between the colonies and Britain. Two of Washington’s generals took their forces down either side of Cayuga Lake and systematically destroyed the Native American villages. The devastation was complete, and in 1789, the Cayugas surrendered their land.<sup>2</sup>

Following the Revolutionary War, Simeon DeWitt, the State Surveyor General and later founder of Ithaca, placed the northern portion of what became Tompkins County in the “New Military Tract,” lands to be given to veterans in payment for their military service. The southern portion of what became Tompkins County was owned by a private land development company.

Settlement began around 1792. Some new arrivals were squatters willing to take a chance on finding land; others came seeking their military allotments. Following the first settlers came ministers, lawyers, and merchants. By 1810, the village of Ithaca had a few houses, a sprinkling of stores and taverns, and several mills powered by the fast-moving streams. With the opening of the Ithaca-Owego Turnpike, Ithaca became a trans-shipment point for goods flowing south.

Tompkins County was officially formed by the state in 1817 and named for Daniel D. Tompkins, a former New York governor and at that time vice president of the United States.

Early settlers were predominantly American-born farmers seeking new land. Some from the East and South brought slaves with them, although their numbers were small.

Tompkins County was officially formed by the state in 1817 and named for Daniel D. Tompkins, a former New York governor and at that time vice president of the United States.

Slavery was abolished in New York State in 1827. Many, but not all, of the people of the county supported emancipation and some helped fugitive slaves make their way to freedom.

The opening of the Erie and Seneca Canals in the early nineteenth century kept local goods flowing to the eastern markets. Railroad development linked Tompkins County with even more destinations beginning in 1832 with the Ithaca-Owego Railroad. By 1870, the County was served by four railroads.

The establishment of Cornell University in 1865 brought stability to the county’s economy. The university attracted students, faculty, and many new residents to the county. Ithaca College opened in several downtown Ithaca buildings in 1892. The village of Ithaca had a steady increase in population while most of the towns in the County reached a peak population around 1850 and then dipped to half that level in the early years of the twentieth century. Population in Tompkins County rose gradually over the course of the nineteenth century and into the mid-twentieth.

From a collection of farms and mills, Tompkins County grew into an area of pleasant towns and villages connected by roads and turnpikes, ferries, and railroads. In 1900, with a population of just 33,830, the County entered the age of the automobile, electrification, industrialization, and world wars. For a decade, beginning in 1914, movies were made in Ithaca. Significant industries established in the next few decades included the Ithaca Gun Company, the Thomas-Morse airplane company, and the Groton Iron Bridge Company. By 1960, the population had doubled to 66,164, and the local economy was booming.<sup>3</sup>

From 1960 to today, the population of Tompkins County grew from 66,164 residents to 96,501 residents and the local economy began to move away from traditional manufacturing and industry to focus on education, high-tech, and service sectors.

## Our Demographic Profile

County population growth in the twentieth century continued slowly, although Cornell University increased in size yearly, from 1885 on. In 1910 the county had 33,647 residents. Increases were slight through 1940 when the total population was 42,340. In the next ten years, however, the overall population jumped by more than 16,000 residents to

<sup>2</sup> Jane March Dieckmann, *A Short History of Tompkins County*

<sup>3</sup> Highlights, Tompkins County Comprehensive Plan, 1975



59,122, with the major gain occurring in Ithaca, reflecting the growth of Cornell University following World War II. An additional jump by 10,000 residents between 1960 and 1970 brought the county population to 77,064. That decade's figures reveal a shift in living patterns with a major increase in the Town of Ithaca, especially in the northeast portion and in the areas adjacent to Cornell.

According to the most recent U.S. Census, conducted in 2000, 96,501 people were living in Tompkins County. Approximately one in three residents were under 21 years of age. On the other end of the scale, one in ten residents were at least 65 years old. About half the adults had at least a bachelor's degree. The census also showed that residents of Tompkins County move their households frequently. In 2000, less than half of residents lived in the same house they inhabited in 1995. This reflects,

A decline in the core labor force over the next 30 years will impact employment and economic development.

in part, the nature of a university community as well as national trends. Population projections for Tompkins County indicate a very gradual increase in population over the next thirty years. These projections take into account birth rates, mortality rates, in-migration, and out-migration and assume that current trends will continue into the future. While the total population is expected to increase to only 102,121 by 2030, the proportion by age will change more dramatically. The under-21 population is expected to increase from 33 percent (current) to 38 percent. The population 65 and older is expected to increase to one in every eight persons.

Correspondingly, the population between ages 21 and 64 is projected to decline to less than half of all residents. Because this group represents the portion of our population that forms the core of our labor force, this anticipated decline will impact employment and economic development in the future. If these trends continue, the impacts may include:

- A decrease in the number of jobs created,
- An increase in commuters from surrounding counties, or more 'distance' jobs, where employees will telecommute from other communities,
- More in-migration to the county in response to increasing economic opportunities, with a resulting increase in population beyond that in the projection,
- More employment of older and younger workers.

### Geology and Natural Surroundings

Tompkins County is made up of approximately 305,000 acres of land. The southern area is dominated by rugged hills with the highest, Connecticut Hill, reaching over 2,000 feet. The northern portion has a more gentle terrain and generally more fertile soils. Approximately one-quarter of the land in Tompkins County is covered by high quality agricultural soils, concentrated in Ulysses, northwestern Enfield, and northern Lansing, although there are smaller pockets located throughout the county.

The most dominant natural feature in Tompkins County is Cayuga Lake. Cayuga Lake is the second-largest Finger Lake and the longest, widest and one of the deepest of the eleven Finger Lakes. Tompkins County has approximately 26 miles of shoreline on Cayuga Lake. It is located in a glacial valley with steep slopes along the lakeshore punctuated by many picturesque gorges. Wall elevations in the gorges

TOMPKINS COUNTY POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS, 2000 CENSUS

	All residents	Excluding college students
	96,501	69,295
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	47,667 (49%)	not available
Female	48,834 (51%)	not available
<b>Age</b>		
Under 21	32,036 (33%)	19,975 (29%)
21 – 64	55,208 (57%)	40,140 (58%)
65 or older	9,257 (10%)	9,180 (13%)
<b>Race (one race)</b>		
White	82,507 (85%)	62,495 (90%)
Asian	6,943 (7%)	2,385 (3%)
Black	3,508 (4%)	2,305 (3%)
American Indian/Alaska Native	275 (<1%)	150 (<1%)
Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	36 (<1%)	20 (<1%)
Other	1052 (1%)	525 (1%)
Two or More Races	2,180 (2%)	1,420 (2%)
Hispanic/Latino (of any race)	2,968 (3%)	1,395 (2%)

can reach 300 feet. The higher elevations of the lake’s tributaries, combined with the steep gorges, produce numerous waterfalls.

The lake divides the northern portion of the county in two. As the principal water body, nearly three quarters of the county’s land area drains into Cayuga Lake before moving northward, ultimately to Lake Ontario. The southern fifth of the County drains southward into the Upper Susquehanna River.

Cayuga Lake has served an important economic role in Tompkins County. In the nineteenth century, the lake was an important link in the transportation route connecting central and southern New York to Buffalo and points west. Today, it serves as a supply for public drinking water, a major regional recreational and tourism resource, and an important link in the waterfowl flyway of the Atlantic Coast.

The topography of the watershed was formed as the land began uplifting approximately 200 million years ago. At that time, drainage flowed to the south, through the Susquehanna River system. During the Ice Age, two glacial events produced the deep gorges that became the Finger Lakes. The retreat of the second glacier resulted in the reversal of drainage in the watershed from the south to the north. This glacial action resulted in the creation of the relatively flat lands in the northern portion of the county (in Ulysses, Lansing, and Groton) and the steep hills and valleys of the south (in Newfield, Danby, and Caroline).

With its varied topography and landforms, the County contains a number of interesting ecological communities, including streams, lakes, ponds, marshes, meadows, fens, forests, swamps, and cliffs. Many important natural areas have been identified in the county with the help of Cornell University’s strong natural resource programs, and a local community of outdoor enthusiasts. Nearly 200 such areas have been identified by the County’s Environmental Management Council in the Unique Natural Areas Inventory of Tompkins County. Tompkins County is also home to a National Natural Landmark, McLean Bog, located in the Town of Dryden. In addition, the County has one Recreational River (a portion of Fall Creek), one Critical Environmental Area (Coy Glen), four State Parks, all or part of eight State Forests, several Audubon-designated Important Bird Areas, and a variety of lands protected by the local Finger Lakes Land Trust, Cornell University, and The Nature Conservancy.

Tompkins County is home to many interesting ecological communities, including streams, lakes, ponds, marshes, meadows, fens, forests, swamps, and cliffs.

### What Lies Ahead

In the past decade, the population of Tompkins County, as in many parts of the Northeast, has grown at a modest rate while the amount of land taken up by development has increased at a rate that has far outpaced population. This

trend is also highlighted in the loss of households in traditional population centers of cities and villages and an increase in the number of households in suburban and rural areas. Upstate New York saw the loss of 40,000 urban households in the 1990s, and an increase in rural and suburban households of 160,000. This type of growth puts at risk many of the characteristics of Tompkins County that we treasure.

When trying to envision life in the future, one thing

is a given: things will change. If past growth patterns give us an indication of future growth, the types of changes we could see include:

- Loss of population, and related loss of businesses and tax base, in the city and villages;
- More new commercial and residential development along roads in the rural and agricultural areas;
- Increased traffic along rural roads and in the urban areas;
- Increased taxes and fees to pay for additional public services such as water, sewer, schools, police, fire, public transportation, and road construction and maintenance;
- Loss of vitality in traditional community centers;
- Loss of agricultural lands, natural habitats, and open space;
- Increased amount of time people spend in their cars;
- Degradation of the quality and quantity of drinking water supplies, streams, and lakes.

Decisions such as where to site a housing development, what land to protect, or where to encourage economic development all have land-use implications and impacts. Planning for the future is the only way to preserve and enhance the characteristics and attributes of Tompkins County that we most cherish, and to ensure that our communities remain healthy, vibrant, and vital.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Vital Communities Initiative

# Interlocking Pieces: Housing, Jobs, and Transportation

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# Housing Choices

## PRINCIPLE

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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.<sup>5</sup> 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.

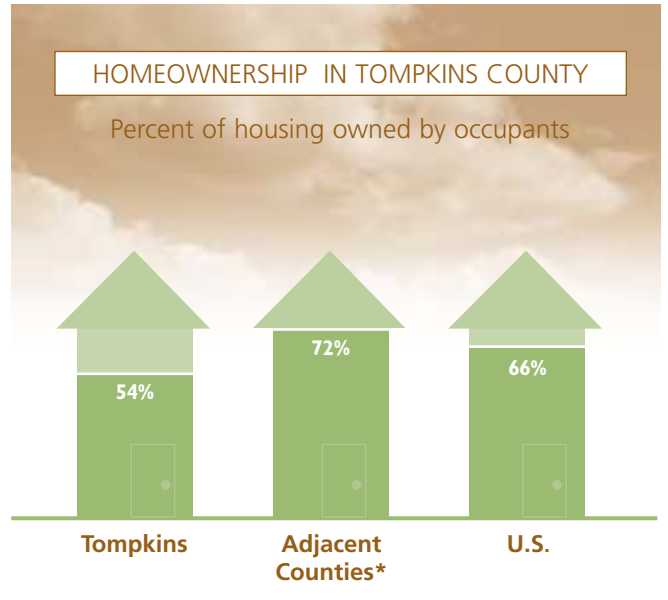
A limited supply of housing stock has resulted in hot competition among buyers, which has pushed home prices up. New housing construction, at a median of \$180,000, is generally not affordable to the average household, and there is little incentive for contractors to develop affordable housing.

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

To rent <sup>1</sup>		To own <sup>2</sup>
\$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

<sup>1</sup> Median monthly rent (2000)

<sup>2</sup> Median residential sales price (2003)

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

<sup>5</sup> 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

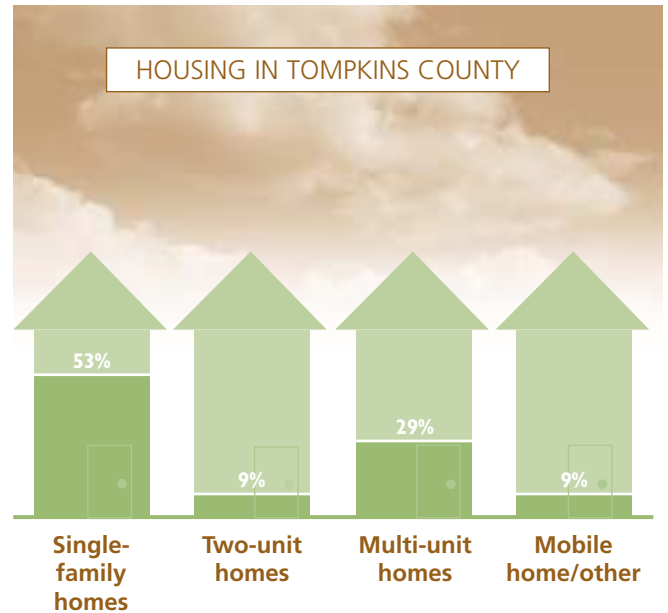
**Tompkins County lacks an adequate supply of affordable housing.**

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.

**Changes in household size and household make-up will necessitate a variety of housing options in the future.**



Source: U.S. Census 2000

TOMPKINS COUNTY HOUSING FACTS

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

## 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**

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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.**

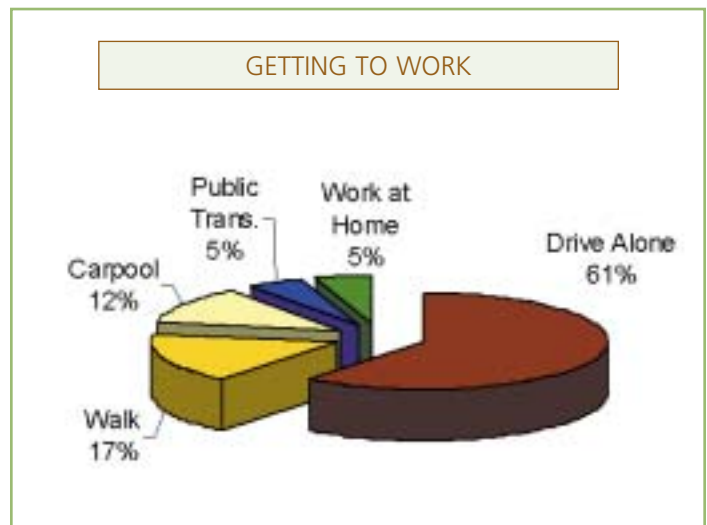
## How We Get Around

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.\*

\* Being reviewed as part of the Ithaca-Tompkins County Transportation Council's 2025 Long Range Transportation Plan Update

**PRINCIPLE**

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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.

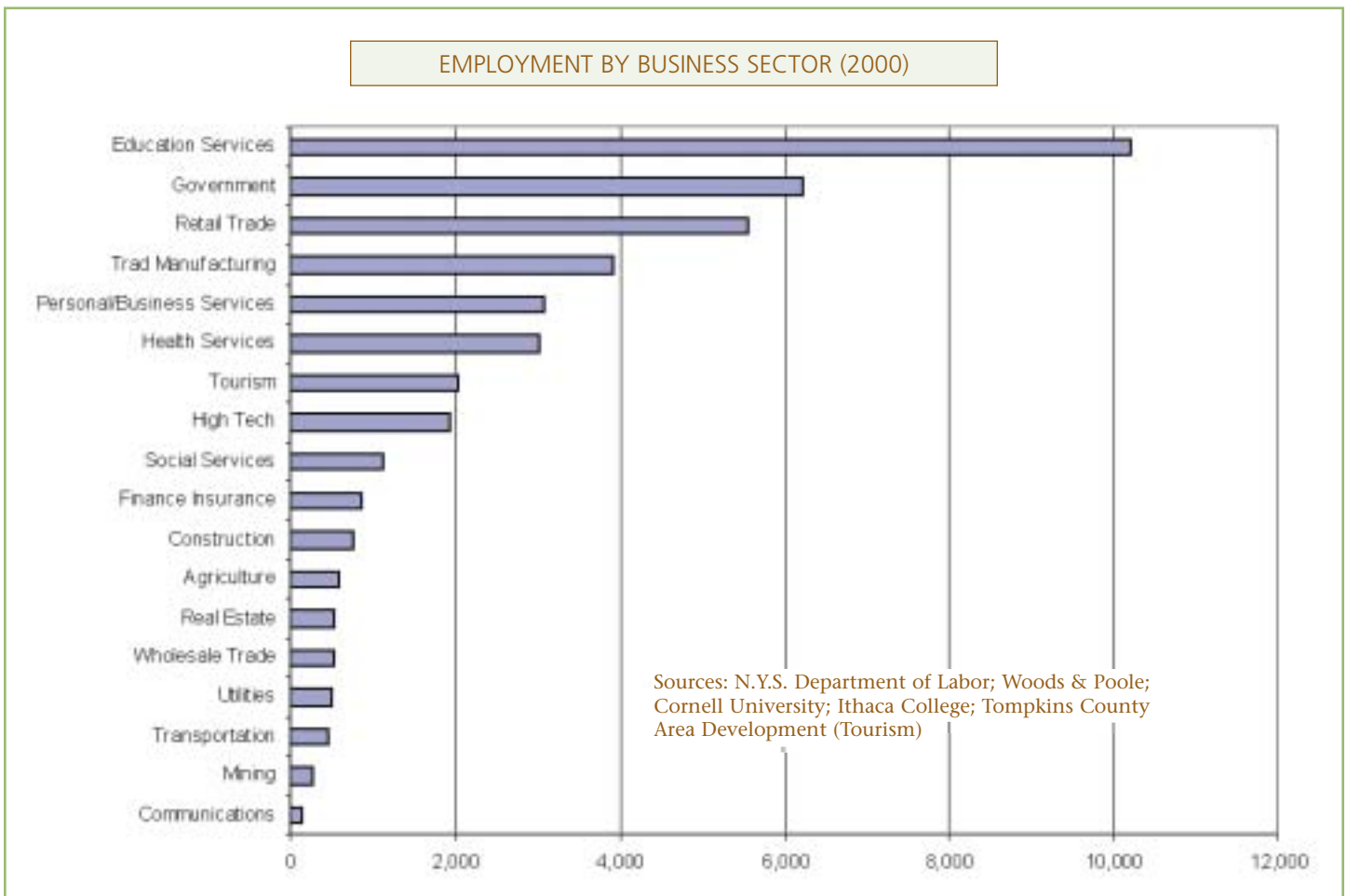
## The Local Economic Picture

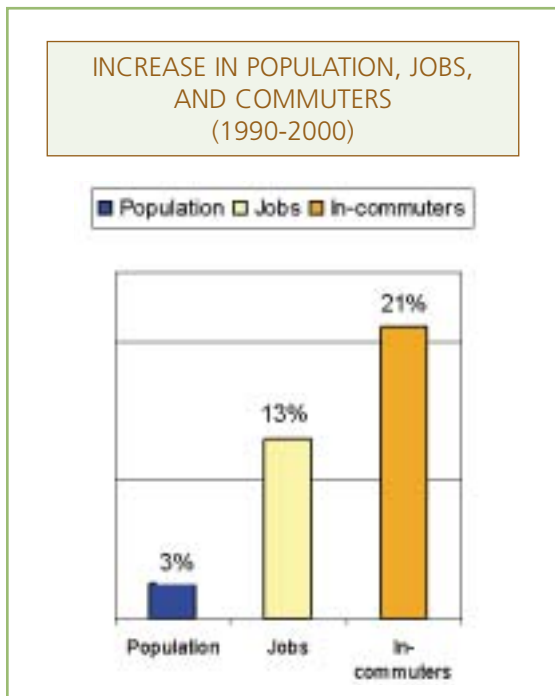
A picture of the local economy will help us know where we are going and how to get there. In recent years, the economy

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.



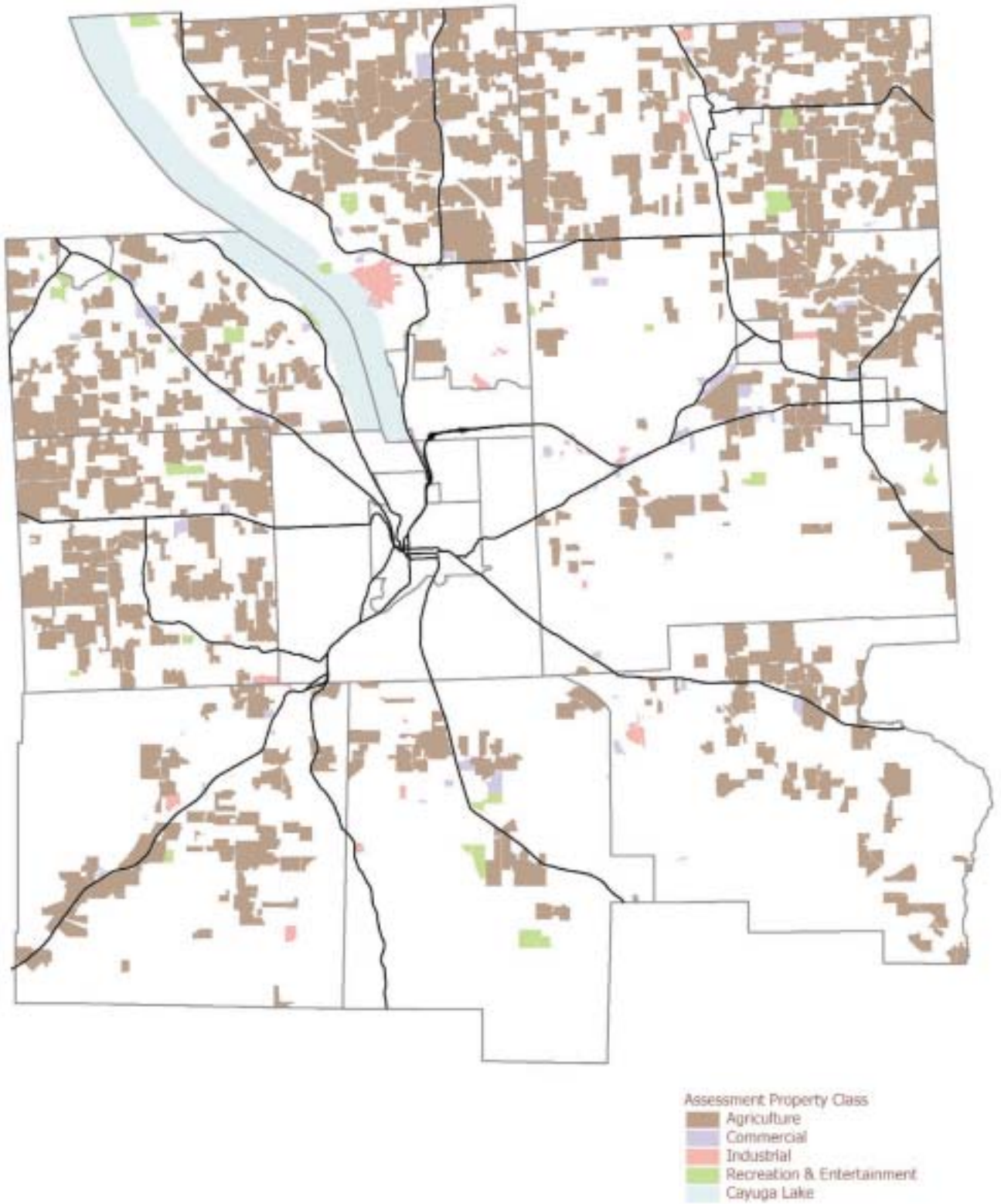
# R u r a l E c o n o m y

## PRINCIPLE

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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,

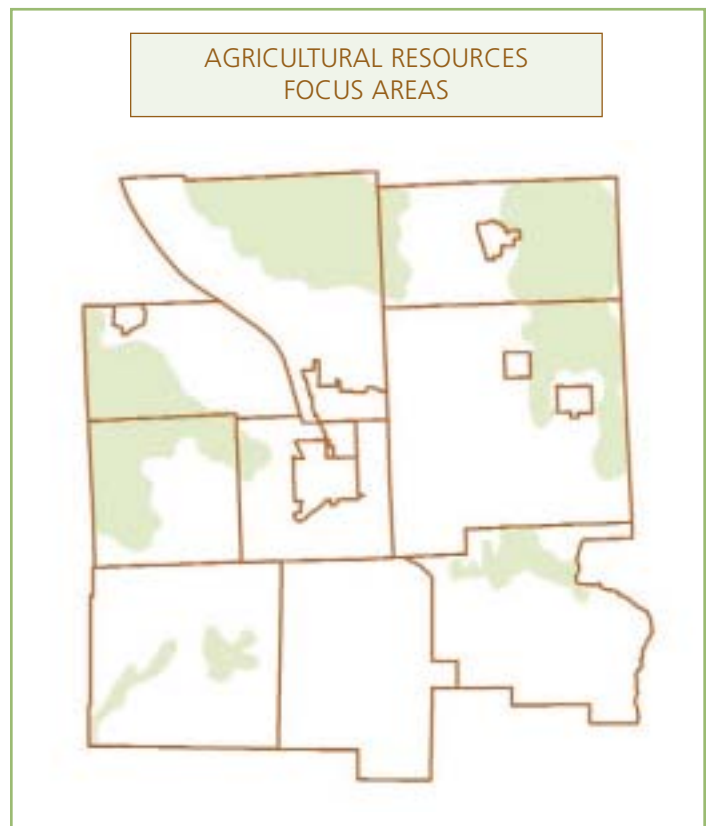
Agricultural districts form the  
foundation of farmland  
protection efforts.

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.

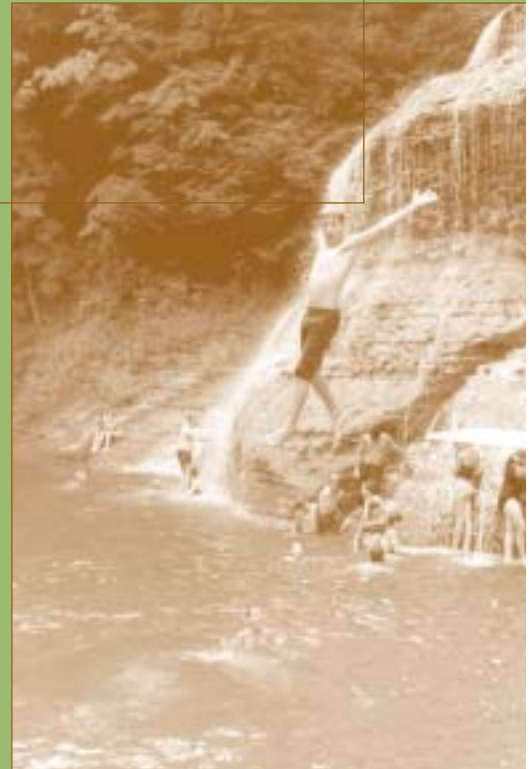
### TO DO

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



# Interlocking Pieces: The Environment

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## O u r F i n i t e R e s o u r c e s

### **PRINCIPLE**

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Finite resources that provide needed community goods, services, recreational opportunities or environmental benefits should be protected and used appropriately.

## Preserving the Irreplaceable

Finite resources such as drinking water, prime agricultural soils, and waterfront lands, as well as some elements of our built environment, contribute to our local economy and the unique character of Tompkins County. These resources serve multiple uses and functions that cannot be replaced if they are destroyed. While many natural systems exhibit a remarkable resilience to disruption, others are vulnerable to small incremental changes which can undermine, or delay indefinitely, their benefits to our community.

### Water Resources

Foremost among our finite resources is drinking water. Not long ago water seemed like an inexhaustible resource, but sufficient water of a quality and quantity to serve human needs is becoming an increasingly scarce commodity worldwide.

Tompkins County is blessed with diverse water resources that provide for the domestic, commercial, and recreational needs of the community, and are necessary for the survival

**Water resources do not function as separate systems but are part of an interconnected whole.**

of many plants and animals. Water is a regional resource. Tompkins County is a major contributor to the Cayuga Lake watershed, with about 80 percent of Tompkins County's water draining north into the Finger Lakes and eventually into Lake Ontario, and 20 percent draining south to the Susquehanna River and eventually into the Chesapeake Bay.

The three major categories of water resources are surface water, groundwater, and wetlands. Surface water consists of streams, creeks, lakes and ponds. Groundwater is water that is stored in the underground spaces between deposits of sand, gravel, and silt, and in the cracks in bedrock. Groundwater deposits that can be expected to yield significant quantities to wells are called aquifers. Areas where surface water infiltrates into these aquifers are called recharge areas and are particularly important to the protection of groundwater quantity and quality. Wetlands include land areas that are inundated with water year-round, as well as areas that are dry for part of the year but collect water seasonally. Wetlands and riparian areas (lands associated with streams and rivers) are important because they provide flood protection, control erosion and sediment, supply surface

water flow and recharge groundwater supplies, and provide habitat for fish and wildlife. Tompkins County contains about 19,800 acres of identified wetlands.

These three major classifications of water resources are distinct parts of a larger interconnected water resources system and should be considered and managed as a system. The United States Geological Survey has recently determined that approximately 60 percent of the flow in surface water streams in central New York originates from groundwater resources. Wetlands along rivers and streams can help temporarily store floodwaters and filter pollutants from surface waters. Similarly, groundwater contributes to stream flow during low water periods.

### Drinking Water Supplies

Surface water provides drinking water for approximately 55 percent of Tompkins County residents. Three water treatment facilities in the county rely on surface water. Bolton Point, operated by the Southern Cayuga Lake Intermunicipal Water Commission, draws its water from Cayuga Lake; the Cornell Water Filtration Plant draws from Fall Creek; and the City of Ithaca Water Treatment Plant uses water from Six Mile Creek.

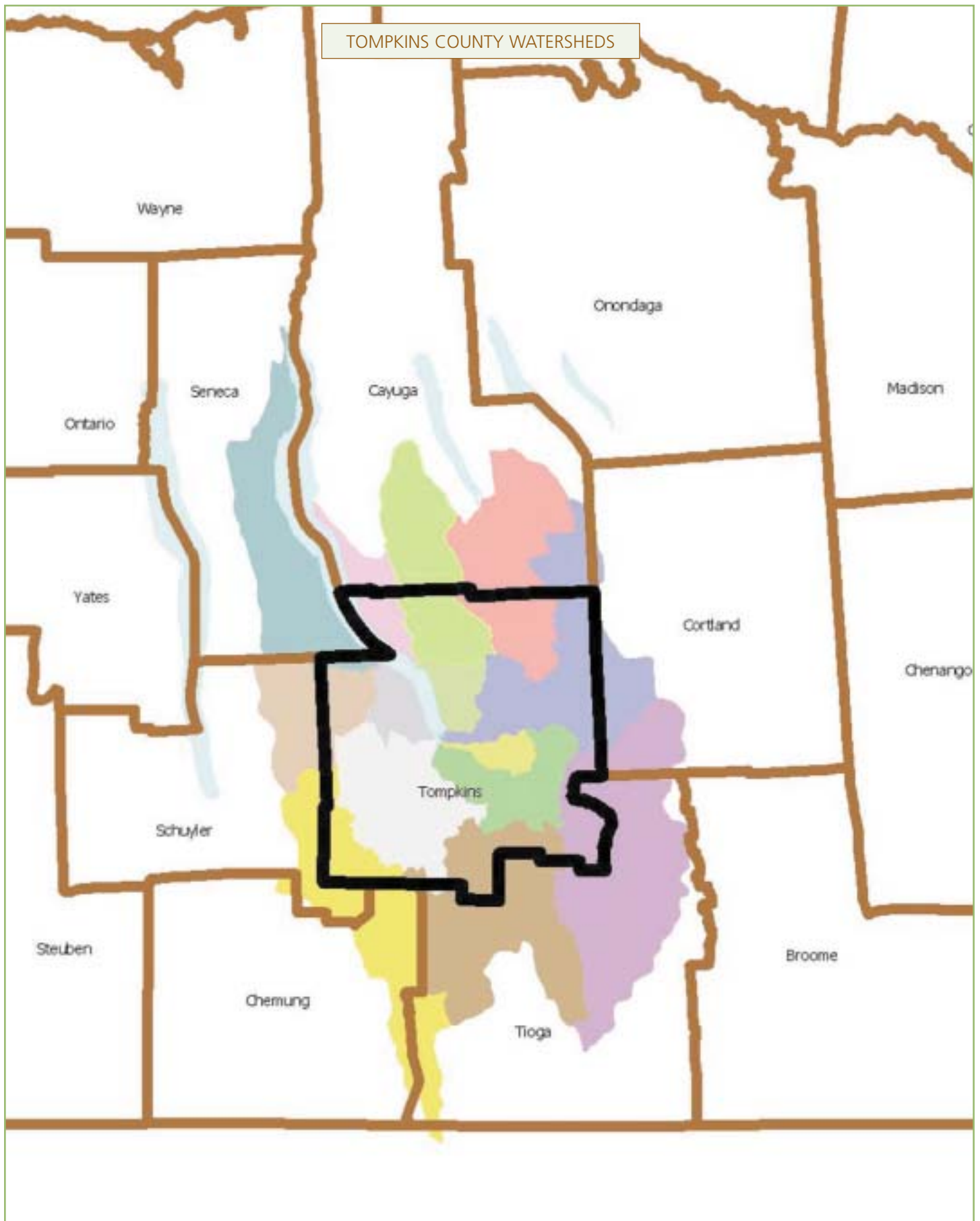
Groundwater is the source of drinking water for approximately 45 percent of county residents, including those with individual wells or on one of the two municipal drinking water systems, and over 170 small private systems.

The amount of available drinking water is primarily an issue in rural areas of the county that obtain drinking water from groundwater. As more homes and businesses are built in these areas, they are supported by new wells withdrawing more water from the aquifers. In some parts of the county

**Studies to determine the extent of our aquifers and define their recharge areas are critical to the protection of these resources.**

new wells can noticeably decrease the supply of water from wells in nearby areas.

Drinking water quality, however, is an issue countywide. Some of our public water supplies are threatened by the potential contamination of an entire aquifer or water body that can result from a single accidental chemical spill or leaking fuel storage tank. Land uses that pose the greatest threat should be located away from areas that contribute to drinking water supplies.



Studies to determine the extent of our aquifers and define their recharge areas are critical to the protection of these resources and should be continued.

### Threats to Water Quality and Quantity

Many of the threats to water quality in Tompkins County come from more dispersed, “non-point” sources. Since 1969, low-density development in the county has increased by 10,000 acres and the amount of impervious surfaces has increased by nearly 1000 acres. These changes, accompanied by intensification of land use, have led to increased erosion and sedimentation, loss of wetlands and riparian areas, greater amounts of stormwater runoff and pollutants carried by the runoff, as well as an increase in flooding. Other impacts of increased rates of stormwater runoff include accelerated channel erosion and alteration of streambed composition, which can dramatically degrade aquatic habitats. A New York State Department of Environmental Conservation water quality study highlights these changes and found that from 1992 to 2002, water quality throughout New York State declined, attributable in large part to changes in land use and the intensity of land use.

In Tompkins County, the impacts of land use change on water resources culminate in Cayuga Lake, where it takes

**From 1992 to 2002, water quality throughout New York State declined.**

approximately 10 years for one drop of water to travel the length of the lake from south to north. The shallow southern end of Cayuga Lake is inherently more vulnerable to pollution than other, deeper portions and suffers from a number of water quality problems including elevated sediment and phosphorous levels, algae blooms, odors, and elevated levels of coliform bacteria. Low levels of agricultural chemicals have also been detected in the lake.

The loss of wetlands that once acted as sediment traps, as well as streambed and streambank erosion, contribute to sedimentation in the southern end of Cayuga Lake. Though sedimentation is often related to changes in land use, construction, and land management practices, it can also result from natural geological processes. A watershed assessment of the Six Mile Creek watershed, revealed that much erosion and sedimentation in that watershed could be directly attributed to natural processes.

### Stormwater Runoff and Flooding

Increased stormwater runoff has a significant impact on floodplain management. As land area is converted to more urbanized uses, the amount of impervious surface associated with that land use generally increases, causing a reduction in groundwater replenishment and increased non-point source pollution and flooding. This increases both the frequency and magnitude of flood events. Flooding and stormwater runoff concerns are exacerbated in many parts of Tompkins County because of the steep slopes and glacially-dominated soils that do a poor job of absorbing runoff during heavy rains or snowmelt. Major storm events occur relatively frequently, and the capacity of our many streams can be quickly overwhelmed.

Population centers that are clustered in valleys and along the shores of creeks are particularly vulnerable to repetitive flooding. Many of Tompkins County’s manufactured homes are located in designated floodplains, increasing the vulnerability of these residents to flood events.

### Prime Agricultural Soils

The United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service classifies soils according to their suitability for agricultural use. According to this classification, Prime agricultural soils are limited in Tompkins County.

Higher quality soils with greater potential to support agricultural activity and productivity in the county are concentrated in Ulysses, northwestern Enfield, and northern Lansing. Smaller pockets are located throughout the County. The county’s best agricultural soils account for less than 25 percent of the land area in the county, highlighting the need to develop measures that effectively protect important agricultural resources and local farms.

**The best agricultural soils account for less than 25 percent of the county’s land area.**

## The Loss of Farmland

Although most of the prime agricultural soils in Tompkins County are used for agriculture, these soils are also well suited for rural residential and commercial development, and the land area devoted to farming has been shrinking. Since 1982, Tompkins County has lost 21 percent of its farmland base. Farmland and other open space in the county are

Since 1982, Tompkins County has lost 21 percent of its farmland.

being consumed by residential, commercial, and sometimes industrial development. Randomly scattered development is common in most areas of the county, primarily in the form of single-family homes along rural roads or as commercial strip development along highways. Between 1969 and 1995 approximately 1,500 acres of open land was converted to commercial and industrial uses, and 14,000 acres for residential uses.

These trends of decentralization and suburbanization threaten the economic viability of farming by fragmenting the land base and intensifying conflicts between farmers and non-farm neighbors.

## Waterfront

We are fortunate in Tompkins County to have approximately 26 miles of shoreline along Cayuga Lake, a magnificent environmental, recreational, social and economic resource. The shoreline of the lake is dominated by recreational and residential land uses. Several prominent parks are located along Cayuga’s shores: Taughannock Falls State Park, Lansing Town Park at Myers Point, Stewart Park, and Cass Park. Much of

Waterfront lands should be reserved for water-dependent uses and complementary water-enhanced uses.

the remainder of the shoreline outside the City of Ithaca is characterized by residential development.

In addition, the waterfront is home to businesses and utilities that depend upon or are related to the lake. Facilities such as marinas, boat rental services, boathouses, and the like, are absolutely dependent on a waterfront location. Many utilities are also dependent upon a location on or near a water body. Examples in Tompkins County include waste-

water treatment facilities in the City of Ithaca and the Village of Cayuga Heights, Bolton Point Water Treatment Plant, AES Cayuga power plant, and the Cornell Lake Source Cooling heat exchange facility.

Some businesses, while not dependent on a waterfront location, are strongly linked to and benefit greatly from a location on the waterfront. Restaurants, hotels, and water-related attractions can help draw tourists to the waterfront.

The City of Ithaca’s waterfront, along Cayuga Inlet, offers a tremendous opportunity to develop an urban waterfront experience for both residents and tourists alike. Recent and ongoing efforts to enhance this waterfront include the Inlet Island Promenade; the Cayuga Waterfront Trail – which will eventually connect the Visitors Center to Cass Park – and relocation of the New York State Department of Transportation’s Maintenance Facility.

## Policies

Development can impact our finite resources in a variety of ways. The loss of these resources to commercial, residential, or other land uses, is often permanent, highlighting the need to develop measures that can effectively protect these important resources.

It is the policy of Tompkins County to:

- Promote appropriate development of waterfront lands for water-dependent or water-enhanced uses, including enhancing public access to Cayuga Lake.
- Protect water quality and quantity in the County’s streams, lakes, and groundwater.
- Protect drinking water supplies from contamination.
- Protect stream corridors, wetlands, and land areas that are seasonally inundated by water.
- Protect prime agricultural land for agricultural use.



## Action Items

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

- TO DO** → Complete watershed assessments for the Fall Creek and Six Mile Creek drinking water sources.
- TO DO** → Continue to conduct aquifer studies.
- TO DO** → Initiate an inspection and maintenance program for individual on-site wastewater treatment systems.
- TO DO** → Update the county flood hazard mitigation program to incorporate watershed-based approaches to reducing the risk of flood damages.
- TO DO** → Update floodplain maps.
- TO DO** → Review municipal ordinances and management practices related to water resources management to ensure consistency within watersheds and among municipalities.
- TO DO** → Develop or identify model stream buffer ordinances and stormwater ordinances.
- TO DO** → Develop a system to ensure regular maintenance of existing drainage systems and use of appropriate road ditching techniques on County maintained roads, and encourage the use of such techniques on other roads in the County.
- TO DO** → Provide education and training programs for public works professionals on techniques for reduction of sedimentation and erosion, and for re-vegetating disturbed areas, when constructing and maintaining bridges and culverts, performing roadside ditching, etc.
- TO DO** → Develop boat docking, boat service areas, and waterfront commercial district on, and in the vicinity of, Inlet Island in the City of Ithaca.
- TO DO** → Redevelop the NYSDOT Maintenance Facility site with water-dependent and/or water-enhanced projects to provide economic benefits to the City and the County and provide public access to the water's edge.
- TO DO** → Dredge Cayuga Inlet and find an appropriate method for disposal of dredge spoil material, for example, using dredged material to create new, functioning wetlands at the south end of Cayuga Lake.



# Natural Features

## PRINCIPLE

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Natural Features that define the community should be preserved and enhanced.

## The Need for Preservation

Tompkins County is known for its resplendent landscapes and natural havens. Both local residents and visitors enjoy and appreciate Cayuga Lake; the many gorges, streams, and waterfalls; our rolling farmland, fields, and wooded hillsides. In fact, we are living in a landscape that became more diverse during the twentieth century with the return of forests in the southern parts of the county and the preservation of significant tracts of our most valued natural areas as parks, state forests, and preserves. In contrast, in the latter part of the twentieth century sprawling development started to adversely impact these natural features.

Increasing rates of land development threaten to fragment the landscapes we cherish, calling into question the

Increasing rates of land development threaten to fragment the landscapes we cherish.

consequences of land use policies that do not include a long-term goal of sustainability. For example: Will our existing natural areas be degraded by encroaching development? Will the return of native wildlife such as river otters, wild turkeys, beavers, and bald eagles continue? Will the scenic views we take for granted as part of our quality of life be marred by inappropriate development?

If we wish to continue to enjoy these features of our community, we need to take action to protect them. Conservation efforts should be determined through public education, development of protection plans, and public/private partnerships. Sustaining profitable and functioning landscapes will be key to protecting these areas over the long-term.

## Our Natural Bounty

A recent study of tourism in Tompkins County, conducted for the Convention and Visitor's Bureau, found that visitors ranked beautiful scenery and waterfalls, and outdoor activities among the features of Tompkins County they liked the most. In addition to a vast number of streams, gorges, waterfalls, lakes, forests, and wetlands, the county also has four State Parks, nearly 39,000 acres of protected natural areas, and miles of hiking and multi-use trails.

Central to Tompkins County's beauty and character is Cayuga Lake. The Cayuga Lake valley's spectacular topography, with steep slopes to the east and west and a relatively

flat drainage basin to the north, was carved by periods of glacial advance and recession. With a length of greater than 38 miles, an average width of almost two miles, and over 95 miles of shoreline, Cayuga Lake dominates the county. It is

Central to Tompkins County's beauty and character is Cayuga Lake.

the longest and widest of the Finger Lakes, and among the deepest, with a maximum depth of 435 feet. Water flows into the lake from a network of more than 140 streams and takes more than ten years to slowly make its way northward, where Cayuga Lake drains into the Oswego River Basin.

Although Cayuga Lake provides a variety of recreational opportunities for Tompkins County residents and visitors, lake access is somewhat limited. Boating facilities at the southern end of the lake are available at Allen H. Treman State Marina and Taughannock Falls State Park on the west side, and at Noah's Marina and Myers Point Municipal Park on the east side. Swimming is limited to Taughannock Falls State Park and Myers Point, although prior to the 1960s there was also a swimming beach at Stewart Park in the City of Ithaca. Hiking and biking amenities along the lake have improved dramatically in recent years, in particular with the development of the Waterfront Trail in the City of Ithaca.

Wetlands provide flood protection and abatement, erosion and sedimentation control, water quality maintenance, groundwater recharging, surface flows maintenance, fish and wildlife habitats, nutrient production and cycling, recreation, open space, education and scientific research, and biological diversity. There are nearly 20,000 acres of wetlands in Tompkins County identified in the National Wetlands Inventory. The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation has regulatory authority for more than 5,000 of these acres.

Tompkins County is crisscrossed with creeks and streams, from major waterways to seasonal rivulets whose music fills our woods. Major creeks include Salmon Creek, Cayuga Inlet, Six Mile Creek, Cascadilla Creek, Fall Creek, Owasco Inlet, Owego Creek, Catatonk Creek, Cayuta Creek, and Taughannock Creek. There are also more than 40 additional named perennial streams, as well as numerous intermittent streams. These stream corridors provide important habitat benefits, promote biodiversity, and connect pockets of open space. Stream corridors also provide important water quality functions, such as filtration and erosion control.

The Unique Natural Areas (UNAs) of Tompkins County are sites with outstanding environmental qualities deserving of special attention for preservation and protection. The 192 designated Unique Natural Areas are found in gorges, woods, swamps, fens, cliffs, and along streams. They are located throughout the county and range in size from less than an acre to more than 4,000 acres.

Greenways provide connecting links between large tracts of existing protected open space. They are intended to meet the needs of wildlife (both plants and animals) for habitat dispersal, breeding, and migration. The 90 square miles of greenways, identified by the Tompkins County Greenway Coalition in 1995, form the basic components of a biological corridor system.

The National Audubon Society, with the support of the American Bird Conservancy, initiated the New York Important Bird Areas (IBAs) program in the Spring of 1996. They identified areas based on the concentration of birds, the presence of endangered, threatened or special concern bird species, the type of habitat, and the use of the site for avian research. Four of the 127 identified Important Bird Areas in New York State are located in Tompkins County.

Tompkins County has nearly 200 miles of hiking and multi-use trails. This includes the Finger Lakes Trail, park trails, trails in state forests, Cornell trails, and trails on nature preserves. In addition, the 1995 Greenways Plan identifies a number of corridors in Tompkins County with potential for future trail development. The future trail corridors were identified based on the location of abandoned railroad beds, the location of population centers, and the potential for connecting existing trails and natural areas.

### Existing Protected Open Space

Protected open space includes natural areas such as state lands, Finger Lakes Land Trust preserves and conservation easements, Nature Conservancy preserves, and county reforestry lands, as well as other types of open space such as municipal parks, county airport clear zones, and cemeteries.

Lands already protected by ownership provide an important framework for future protection efforts.

Many natural resources – such as wetlands, greenways, birds areas, and areas of unique plant and animal species – are located in these protected areas. In addition, many of these

are open to the public and provide important recreation opportunities.

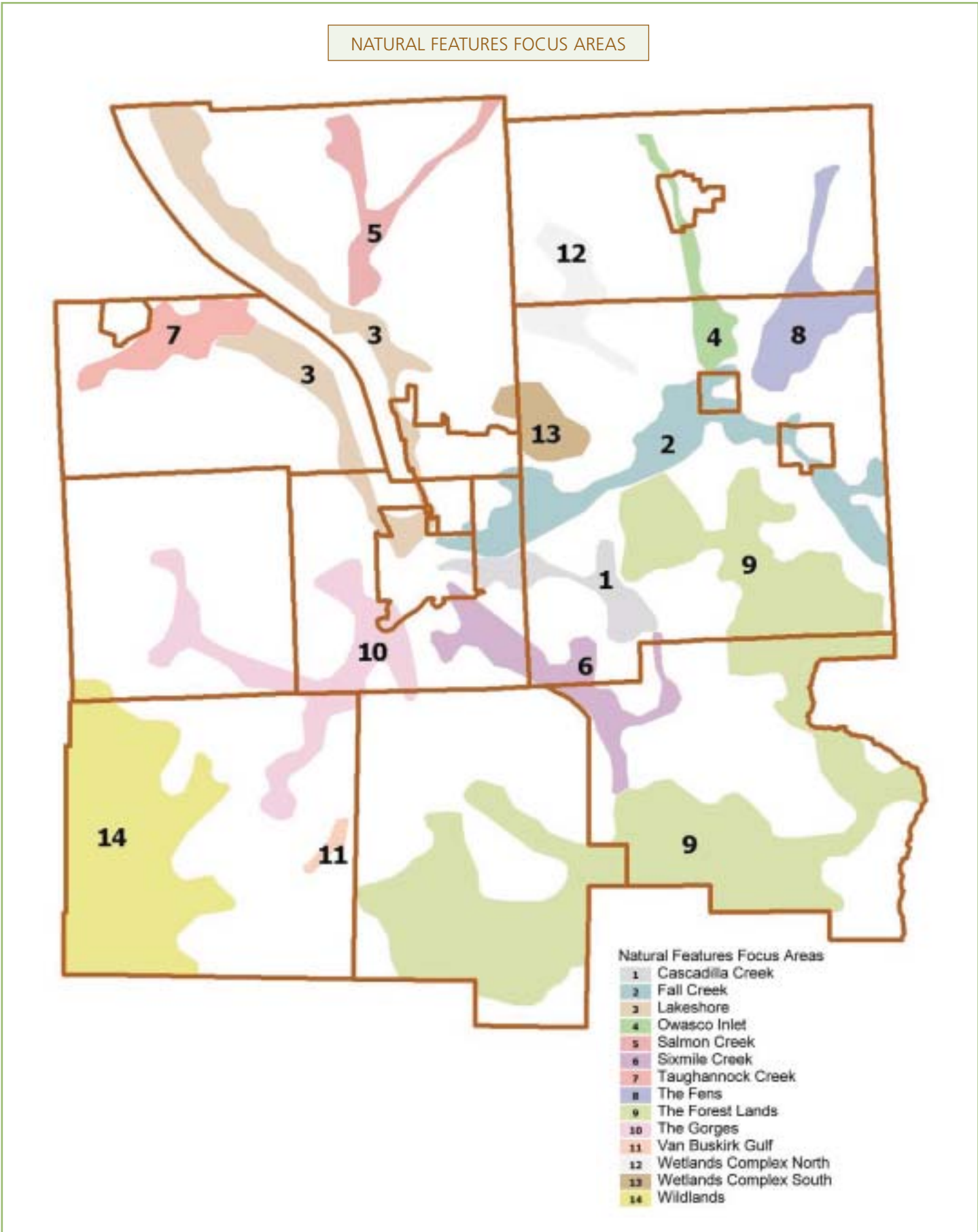
Lands already protected by ownership provide an important framework for future protection efforts. Building on these areas will help create a “critical mass” of interconnected open space that will promote habitat connections, sustain agriculture, protect water quality, and ensure the health of wildlife populations for generations to come.

PROTECTED NATURAL AREAS	
Owner	Acres
New York State	27,808
Cornell University	6,820
Finger Lakes Land Trust	2,609
City of Ithaca	1,160
Tompkins County	654
The Nature Conservancy	393
Private/other	75
Other local municipalities	30
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>39,548</b>

### Natural Features Focus Areas

Good land stewardship, and the strong connection between landowners and their lands, provides a foundation for long-term preservation of the natural resources we value. Individual efforts, however, cannot fully address the need for community-wide open space preservation. Successfully preserving open space and its various functions requires a coordinated effort that spans across property lines and municipal boundaries. Identifying areas in the county to focus our efforts will help achieve this goal.

Tompkins County has been proactive in identifying and mapping many of the natural resources in the county. Based on the location and concentration of those resources, such as Unique Natural Areas, wetlands, stream corridors, public drinking water resources, important bird areas, and hiking and multi-use trails and trail corridors, the County Planning Department has identified 14 distinct and significant natural features “Focus Areas,” ranging in size from 400 to 40,000 acres.



Sources: Tompkins County Planning Department

### NATURAL FEATURES FOCUS AREAS

<b>Taughannock Creek</b>	3,000 acres	About 25 percent is located in Taughannock Falls State Park. Resources include Taughannock Creek, a biological corridor, small wetlands, UNAs*, a portion of an IBA**, a portion of the Black Diamond Trail, and waterfront access.
<b>Lakeshore</b>	9,000 acres	This area surrounds the most significant natural focal point of Tompkins County. Resources include a large biological corridor, an IBA, numerous stream corridors, and important wetland clusters, waterfront access, and trail corridors.
<b>The Gorges</b>	8,000 acres	Three spectacular gorges include hanging cliffs with substantial waterfalls. Thirty percent of the area is protected by ownership, largely by inclusion in Buttermilk Falls State Park and Treman State Park. Resources include UNAs, wetlands, a biological corridor, a municipal well, a portion of the Finger Lakes Trail, and trails in the state parks.
<b>The Wildlands</b>	6,000 acres	There is very little development in this area, particularly outside the Route 13 corridor. The area is predominantly forested, with agricultural lands in the valley. Almost 60 percent is already protected as open space. Resources include a biological corridor, an IBA, UNAs, wetlands, perennial streams, significant sections of the Finger Lakes Trail, and two potential trail corridors. The area is home to a growing population of black bears.
<b>Van Buskirk Gulf</b>	400 acres	This area is small but significant for the natural features it possesses. Resources include a high-ranking UNA which accounts for more than half the focus area, Chaffee Creek, and a potential trail corridor.
<b>The Forest Lands</b>	40,000 acres	This crescent-shaped area includes four state forests. More than half the area is protected by ownership. Resources include UNAs, portions of several biological corridors, multiple creeks, wetlands, and an extensive trail network.
<b>Six Mile Creek</b>	5,000 acres	This area is defined by Six Mile Creek and its perennial tributaries. Almost 30 percent is protected by ownership, primarily as part of the City of Ithaca Six Mile Creek Natural Area and watershed protection area. Resources include an extensive biological corridor, UNAs, wetlands, and existing and potential trail corridors.
<b>Cascadilla Creek</b>	3,000 acres	Forty percent of this area is protected open space, although only half of these lands are protected to preserve the natural features. Resources include a biological corridor, wetlands, UNAs, East Hill Recreation Way, Ellis Hollow Nature Preserve trails, and the Cornell Plantations Cascadilla Creek trail. These trails provide recreation as well as transportation connections between downtown Ithaca, Cornell, and outlying population areas.
<b>Fall Creek</b>	9,000 acres	Almost 30 percent of this area is protected by ownership. Resources include an IBA, wetlands, UNAs, a biological corridor, potential trail corridors, and an existing trail network that includes Cornell Plantations trails, Dryden Trail, Freeville Trail, and the Dryden Lake Park Trail.
<b>The Fens</b>	4,000 acres	This area includes numerous and extensive fens, which are designated as a National Natural Landmark. The fens, many of which are part of UNAs, are scattered along the stream corridors. Additional resources include a biological corridor and the proposed Lime Hollow Trail.
<b>Owasco Inlet</b>	2,000 acres	This is the only focus area with no land currently protected by ownership. Resources include a biological corridor, wetlands, and a UNA. A potential trail extends along an abandoned railroad grade from the Village of Freeville past the Village of Groton.
<b>Wetlands Complex South</b>	2,000 acres	More than a third of this focus area is protected by ownership by inclusion in the Cornell University Natural Areas. Resources include a number of large wetlands and UNAs.
<b>Wetlands Complex North</b>	3,000 acres	Less than 15 percent is protected by ownership. Protected lands include a cluster of properties with Finger Lakes Land Trust conservation easements. Resources include a biological corridor along Mill Creek, and scattered wetlands and UNAs.
<b>Salmon Creek</b>	3,000 acres	Only 30 acres of this area are currently protected by ownership, as a Finger Lakes Land Trust Nature Preserve. Resources include an IBA, a biological corridor, wetlands and a UNA.

## Benefits of Preserving Open Space

Open space provides a variety of important quality of life functions including the health benefits of outdoor recreation and general enjoyment of the natural beauty and scenic views. These amenities can contribute to the local economy by increasing property values and tax revenues, attracting tourists, and ensuring the continuance of agriculture and other unique working landscapes. A case study of town-houses in Tompkins County found that views of “ecological greenspace,” defined as some type of protected natural area, increased the property value. This was also true for properties near Cayuga Lake, major creeks, and State Parks.

Open space also supports valuable environmental processes such as protecting significant types of habitat and enhancing critical environmental processes such as water filtration, recharge of groundwater resources, and climate control.

## Policies

Tompkins County has been proactive in identifying many of the natural features we value, through the Unique Natural Areas Inventory, Building Greenways for Tompkins County, and the Tompkins County Agricultural Lands and Natural Areas Feasibility Study. The identified Natural Features Focus Areas indicate where conservation efforts should be applied through public education, the development of protection plans and public/private partnerships.

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

- Preserve the natural features, ecosystems, and forest lands within the Natural Resources Focus Areas identified in the Comprehensive Plan.
- Preserve and protect scenic views, areas of natural beauty, and the rural character of Tompkins County.
- Protect the ecological, economic, and recreational functions and beauty of Cayuga Lake.
- Preserve and enhance existing parks, hiking trails, active and passive recreation facilities, and historic resources, and foster the creation of new recreational amenities.

## Action Items

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

- TO DO** → Establish an open-space program to protect or preserve natural resources and recreational amenities in the focus areas identified in the Comprehensive Plan using tools appropriate to the functions of those resources.
- TO DO** → Define stream corridor buffers for the major tributaries to Cayuga Lake and encourage use of appropriate measures to preserve the designated stream corridors.
- TO DO** → Compare the results of the New York State Gap Analysis Program and the results of the New York Natural Heritage Program’s Significant Natural Communities with the natural features focus areas identified in the Comprehensive Plan.
- TO DO** → Develop and disseminate educational information tailored to each natural features focus area and each agricultural resources focus area.
- TO DO** → Conduct a Scenic Resources Inventory and prepare a Scenic Resources Preservation Plan.
- TO DO** → Provide support to Tompkins County’s municipalities that would like to identify and codify appropriate portions of natural features focus areas as Critical Environmental Areas.
- TO DO** → Develop or identify model performance standards to preserve natural resources.
- TO DO** → Develop or obtain a system to track land use changes and preservation efforts.
- TO DO** → Complete the Cayuga Waterfront Trail and the Black Diamond Trail.



# Interlocking Pieces: Neighborhoods and Communities

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# Strong Communities

## PRINCIPLE

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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.

## Where would you rather walk?



*Safety, aesthetics, social perception, and infrastructure all contribute to how inviting an area is for walking.*

## What Makes a Strong Community?

Strong communities come in many different packages. Some can be found in clusters of houses in rural areas, others in busy urban neighborhoods, and still others in suburban subdivisions. Common characteristics of strong communities are friendly relationships between neighbors, satisfaction with the quality of the built environment, and a feeling that residents can live a safe and healthy life. There is a national trend for skilled workers and employers to move to locations – often smaller cities – that offer a variety of strong communities.

An indicator of a strong community is how frequently people walk in their neighborhoods. The presence of walkers indicates that elements of pedestrian infrastructure,

**An indicator of a strong community is how frequently people walk in their neighborhoods.**

security, convenience, and community destinations are present. Among the benefits for walkers are impromptu interactions with neighbors, which foster a sense of belonging. Walking is also a healthy, stress-relieving, and low-cost means of exercise.

## Benefits of a Walkable Community

Surveys have shown that people who walk for recreation and exercise tend to walk near their homes, and people who live in neighborhoods with walkways that connect to multiple destinations walk three times as often as people who live on streets that do not connect to destinations.

Communities can be built or improved so that walking is a viable alternative. An inviting pedestrian infrastructure can reduce the need for people to drive cars to every destination. Among the many benefits of a walkable community are improved air quality, lower transportation costs, improved personal health and fitness, and expanded consumer housing choice. Another significant benefit is improved access to services for the portion of population that is too old, too young, or too poor to drive.

Walkability is defined as the degree to which people feel comfortable and safe walking to and from destinations. A good general rule of thumb is that people are willing to walk five to ten minutes to run an errand or walk to school, but for anything over that distance, the inclination shifts to driving a vehicle. A five- to ten-minute walk translates roughly into a quarter- to a half-mile in distance.

## The Impact of Automobiles

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With the widespread and affordable ownership of private cars, suburbanization of shopping areas, and the development of schools and other community destinations outside of existing population centers, the simple act of walking has fallen out of favor. Residential development outside of existing population centers, combined with a more sedentary lifestyle has led to fewer people walking or biking to work, school, and other destinations.

Estrangement from this basic, healthy, and enjoyable activity has had many negative consequences, among them poor human health, stress on our roadway infrastructure, degradation of the environment, and erosion of social interaction among neighbors. The overuse of automobiles has affected our well-being in numerous ways:

- **Health:** Americans in general are exercising less and eating more, with resulting dramatic increases in obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and other illnesses. Poor diet and lack of exercise is now second only to cigarette smoking as a leading cause of death in the United States.
- **Highways:** Heavy use of our streets, roads, and highways leads to deteriorating road conditions and the need for repairs that many governments are finding difficult to afford.
- **Environment:** According to the Environmental Protection Agency, 51 percent of the carbon monoxide in typical U.S. cities comes from vehicles, with vehicle emissions contributing significant amounts of the air pollutants that affect human health and the environment.
- **Social connections:** Dependence on the automobile for even the shortest household trips limits social interaction among neighbors, adding to the increasing trend of social isolation.

## The Wish to Walk

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The 2000 U.S. Census showed that many Tompkins County residents are walkers, much more so than other Upstate residents. In 2000, an average of 4 percent of all people walked to work in New York State (omitting New York City). In Tompkins County, 17 percent walked to work, and 1 percent rode a bicycle. In the City of Ithaca, the percentage of walkers was 41 percent. Many of the walkers are students, but even with students removed from the calculation, the countywide average for walking is 7 percent.

Another item gleaned from the 2000 Census is that the number of walking commuters in New York State declined by

24 percent from 1990 to 2000. In Tompkins County, the number of walkers declined by just 2 percent. It appears that we are a community that relies on and values walking.

## The Price of Suburbanization

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Traffic impacts on neighborhoods, deterioration of community infrastructure, disinvestments in existing neighborhoods, and rural and suburban isolation are problems that are increasingly impacting Tompkins County communities. Pedestrian-scale development and enhanced walkability, on the other hand, can contribute to more vital and sustainable places to live and work.

While traditional rural communities were linked together by the bonds of an agrarian economy tied to the land and grassroots cooperative problem solving, such commonality of interests and interaction is often lacking in today's suburban and rural residential areas.

Low density sprawling development creates living environments that provide few opportunities for interaction with neighbors and often lack such amenities as sidewalks and neighborhood parks that contribute to a healthy lifestyle. Health officials have made the link between built environments that encourage walking and active, healthier lifestyles. This recognition is prompted by increasing rates of obesity-related illnesses and the skyrocketing costs incurred by society to pay for medical treatment of those illnesses.

Planning trends nationwide are reacting to the proliferation of suburbs through movements such as New Urbanism, Neotraditional Planning, and Healthy Communities. In New York State an outgrowth of these movements is the Quality Communities Initiative. What these movements have in common is an attempt to create communities that derive strength and vitality from the greater interaction among neighbors and the health benefits that result from well-developed pedestrian networks and nearby availability of employment, shopping, community facilities, and other services.

## A Return to Aesthetics and Community Identity

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Conventional late twentieth century development patterns have helped to create a predominance of strip shopping centers and large suburban tract home developments that are, with the exception of small cosmetic variations, largely indistinguishable from one another. While such an approach may conserve costs initially and make development more profitable for some, it does little to stimulate civic pride or contribute to a strong sense of place with which community

residents can identify. Also, since low-density suburban and strip mall developments are rarely located within ten-minute walks of destinations and are rarely designed to be easily and invitingly accessible to pedestrians, these types of development patterns result in fewer pedestrian trips and increases in traffic and congestion.

While developers need to respond to basic commercial or housing needs, developments can and should also help create communities that are distinctive and unique. Fostering the

**Development should not only respond to basic commercial or housing needs, but should also help create communities that are distinctive and unique.**

types of physical environments that create a sense of civic pride also support a more cohesive community fabric. As a result, economic benefits accrue as well; high-quality communities with architectural and natural elements that reflect the interests of all residents are more likely to retain their economic vitality and value over time.

Communities that have a strong sense of place represent the values of their residents and reflect the unique historical, cultural, economic, and geographical context of the area. They use natural and man-made boundaries and landmarks to create a sense of defined neighborhoods, urban communities and rural hamlets. These communities encourage the construction and preservation of buildings that contribute to the look and feel of a community. Beyond the construction of buildings, these communities reflect their unique characteristics in myriad details – such as landscaping, signs, and awnings – that help to further distinguish the area for passers-by and visitors.

Guided by their own vision of how and where to grow, communities that have adopted these techniques can direct investment and development into areas that already reflect a strong sense of place. Moreover, these communities can encourage new development to make a better effort to create distinctive, unique civic assets.

## Action Items

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



Advance implementation of a county-wide multiuse trail network.



Conduct pedestrian level-of-service and walkability studies in interested neighborhoods, villages, and hamlets throughout the County.



Identify population centers and community facilities that are underserved by the existing transit system.



Provide pedestrian connections between the waterfront and downtown residential neighborhoods through urban creek corridors.

## Policies

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

- Facilitate the creation and maintenance of a safe, appealing, and efficient multi-purpose network for walking and enhance the pedestrian environment through appropriate design.
- Locate county facilities and encourage other community facilities to be located within population centers, particularly those facilities that provide opportunities for social interaction, group activities, community events, and meeting spaces.
- Encourage the development of diverse communities that provide a mix of uses, a variety of employment options, social and recreational opportunities, and an assortment of amenities within walking distance of residential development.
- Enhance the quality of communities by improving the character of the built environment, including visually appealing architectural elements and streetscapes that encourage pedestrian travel, facilitate community interaction, and promote public safety.
- Preserve and enhance the distinct identities and historic character of existing neighborhoods and structures, and encourage the development of new neighborhoods that possess their own special sense of place, through attractive design of public places; proximity to schools, parks and other services; and community festivals and events.
- Improve transportation options for people who need access to employment, shopping, and health services.

## Centers of Development

### PRINCIPLE

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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 Consequences of Sprawl

Traditional historic patterns of development are still very visible and prominent in much of Tompkins County. The pattern of a main street neatly lined with historic buildings sitting amid a grid of neighborhood streets can be seen in the City of Ithaca and its neighborhoods, and in most of the county's villages. Suburban development patterns, which were the dominant development trend of the second half of the twentieth century, can also be found throughout the county.

During the post-World War II era, many communities experienced rapid expansion at the edges of their population centers. Central neighborhoods within cities, town, and villages were emptied of wealth and workers in favor of newer, low density, dispersed developments on their fringes. This pattern of development has had a dramatic effect on the social and economic viability of existing communities, as well as significant impact on the natural environment and quality of community life. The development of formerly open lands has reduced plant and animal habitats, degraded water resources and quality, and influenced transportation choices that have contributed to degraded air quality and increased the threat of global climate change.

This pattern is evident in Tompkins County in the lower density subdivisions built in the suburbs and outlying areas, in the strip commercial development along roadways, and in the residential housing along rural roads throughout the county. Suburban sprawl and low-density, scattered rural development have provided additional housing and living options for residents of the county. However, if this type of land use continues to dominate development practices in the county, the downsides – which are many – will become more pronounced.

Problems associated with low-density development and sprawl include:

- disinvestments in traditional community centers;
- fragmentation and destruction of farmland, forests, wildlife habitats and other open space resources;
- increased traffic from heavy reliance on the automobile;
- degradation of urban neighborhoods;
- higher costs of providing public services; and
- isolation and lack of access to jobs and services.

A 2003 analysis of growth and development trends and population in Upstate New York found that suburban development patterns lead to great imbalances in land use compared to population growth. In the 15 years from 1982 to 1997, the amount of developed land increased by 30 percent. Meanwhile, population grew by just 2.6 percent, reducing the density of the built environment by 21 percent.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, land is being developed at a far greater rate than the rate of population growth. If we can direct development into existing community centers we can protect the natural resources we cherish, and create and maintain strong communities.

Land is being developed at a far greater rate than the rate of population growth.

## A Return to the Traditional Neighborhood

A key element in combating this sprawling land use pattern is a return to a pattern of development that resembles more closely the traditional neighborhood and village than the typical late twentieth century suburb. New concepts of urban design make such density compatible with many of the amenities that were sought by those moving to suburban areas, such as more green space, more parks and trails, and increased safety. A denser pattern of development also provides enhanced living options for our aging population including the opportunity to use public transit for health care visits and other services.

Conventional development patterns have helped to create a predominance of strip-mall shopping centers and large suburban tract home developments that are often, with the exception of small cosmetic variations, largely indistinguishable from one another. This does little to stimulate civic pride or contribute to a strong sense of place with which community residents can identify.

## Mixed Land Use

Mixing land uses – commercial, residential, recreational, educational, and others – in neighborhoods or places that are accessible by bicycle and on foot can create vibrant and diverse communities. A mix of uses attracts people to shop, meet friends, and live in neighborhoods like Fall Creek in the City of Ithaca or villages like Trumansburg, two areas that have seen rapid appreciation in the value of residential real estate.

Mixed land uses are critical to achieving great places to live, work, and play. When homes are located within short

<sup>7</sup> Rolf Pendall, *Sprawl Without Growth: The Upstate Paradox*



distances to grocery stores, schools, or key employment centers, residents can take advantage of alternatives to driving, such as walking or biking. A mix of land uses also supports a more varied population and a wider commercial base to support public transit. Mixed land uses can enhance the vitality and security of an area by increasing the number of people using sidewalks and walkways. A mix of land uses also helps to revitalize community life because streets, public spaces, and retail establishments again become places where people meet and talk.

Mixed land uses also bring substantial fiscal and economic benefits. Commercial parcels often have higher property values, and when located near residential areas can help raise local tax revenues. Businesses recognize the benefits of being able to attract customers and clients, as well as skilled workers, from nearby residential centers. Many of the nation's best commercial real estate markets are in cities and suburbs with vibrant, traditional downtowns centers.

### Nodal Development

Nodal development – that is, development that is clustered in a population center – is a way to direct growth towards existing communities that are already served by viable infrastructure. Nodal development uses the resources that existing neighborhoods offer, and maintains the value of public and private investment. By encouraging development in existing areas, communities benefit from a stronger tax base, closer proximity of jobs and services, increased efficiency of already developed land and infrastructure, reduced development pressure in fringe areas, and preservation of farmland and open space.

In addition, the process of increasing development in existing communities can maximize the use of existing impervious surfaces, such as existing shared parking lots,

Short-term profits may result from developing outside of population centers, but the long-term costs are passed on to communities.

thereby improving local and regional water quality. Denser development can also create opportunities for more transportation options, which lower vehicle miles traveled and ultimately improve regional air quality. Often existing neighborhoods can accommodate much of the growth that communities require through infill development, brownfields redevelopment, and the rehabilitation of existing buildings.

#### CENTERS OF DEVELOPMENT

##### Developing outside of community centers:

- Requires more linear feet of utility lines (water, sewer, electric, phone, etc.)
- Creates an ever-spiraling need for services while areas already served may be stagnating or in decline

##### Developing in existing community centers:

- Promotes stronger tax base
- Allows closer proximity of jobs, services, and housing
- Increases efficiency of already developed land and infrastructure
- Reduces development pressure in fringe areas
- Allows for preservation of farmland and open space

Infill development consists of building homes, businesses and public facilities on unused and underutilized lands within existing communities. Taking advantage of infill development opportunities keeps resources where people already live, allows rebuilding to occur, and is key to accommodating growth that supports the quality of life for existing residents.

According to the Urban Land Institute, developing new neighborhoods on the outskirts of existing ones eventually costs a community from 40 to 400 percent more than infill development, when the costs of building and maintaining new roads, sewers, fire stations and schools are taken into account. Other costs include the health and psychological toll of air pollution, traffic congestion, and loss of open space. Short-term profits may result from developing outside of population centers, but the long-term costs are passed on to communities in the form of higher taxes, deterioration of local roadways, distress of downtown businesses, and a declining quality of life. Given our car culture, all growth increases traffic to some degree, but infill can alleviate congestion by reducing trips and encouraging alternative transportation.

## Policies

A pattern of development that replicates traditional neighborhoods or that builds on the infrastructure and strengths of existing communities will combat sprawl and preserve open land, resources, and public and private funds.

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

- Strengthen and enhance the City of Ithaca’s downtown area as the urban center of the County.
- Strengthen and enhance the villages and hamlets of the County as vital service and community centers.
- Increase the amount and density of housing and business space in the central business districts throughout the County.
- Promote greater density by encouraging development of existing “gaps” left by abandoned buildings and vacant parcels.
- Concentrate appropriate commercial, industrial, and retail development onto relatively small amounts of land, in close proximity to housing and consumers, in existing areas of concentrated development.

## Action Items

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



Work with municipalities to identify and map areas appropriate for infill development.



Develop or identify model development design standards that address how to maintain a distinct edge between the urban/village areas and the rural countryside.



Evaluate and modify the following programs for consistency with and furtherance of the nodal development patterns: review of development proposals under GML 239, Economic Development Revolving Loan Fund, Agricultural Districts, and advisory boards’ work programs.

**PRINCIPLE**

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The effectiveness of taxpayer dollars should be maximized by investing government funds in public infrastructure and facilities in the most efficient manner possible.

## Cost of Infrastructure

Investments in public infrastructure and facilities represent a significant portion of local taxpayer dollars. At the county level, capital construction and facility and infrastructure maintenance, including debt service, requires nearly \$12 million annually. Total transportation expenditures by all levels of government in Tompkins County total over \$35 million a year.

The cost and distribution of many public services can be directly linked to growth and development decisions. Development patterns that result in increased costs for public infrastructure may reduce funds available for public services such as education and health care.

## Responsible Public Spending

Decisions about investments in public facilities and infrastructure can complement other community goals – or be in conflict with them. Compact, higher density development patterns can reduce the cost to taxpayers of additional miles of road, feet of water and sewer lines, miles of transit travel, and number of public facilities.

A public spending ethic that recognizes that it is generally more cost-effective to utilize existing infrastructure, and to add to the capacity of existing systems before building new ones, can support and reinforce the quality of life in existing communities while lightening the burden on taxpayers. Particularly in these days of constrained resources at all levels of government, we must recognize that land use

**Land use decisions, or the decision not to address land use issues, have direct financial consequences for current and future generations.**

decisions, or the decision not to address land use issues, have direct financial consequences for current and future generations.

Every new foot of road, sewer line, and water line is not only a current capital cost but is an ongoing maintenance expense and will one day need to be replaced. Unlike many expenditures for current services, capital investments represent a long term commitment of public resources. Dispersed development can also result in ongoing increased public service costs for public or special transportation to allow residents to gain access to needed medical and other services; busing of school children; public safety patrols; emergency

response capability; and provision of other community services at more sites for a given population than would otherwise be necessary.

## Quality of Community Life

High public costs can discourage private investment and result in a downward spiraling cycle of community decline. On the other hand compact development may allow taxpayers to purchase a higher level of public services for the same tax dollar. Communities that can maintain higher levels of public facilities and services in a cost effective manner are more attractive locations for private investment. Private investment in compact development, in turn, provides the tax base to support desired services and results in successful, sustainable communities.

## Policies

It is the policy of Tompkins County to:

- Maintain County facilities to protect the public’s investment, to effectively serve residents, and to provide an efficient working environment for employees now and in the future.
- Optimize the value of community investments in water treatment and distribution facilities and in sewer collection and treatment facilities by encouraging higher density in areas served by these facilities.
- Save public costs by encouraging new development to locate in places contiguous to existing development where sewer, water, roads and other infrastructure already exist, or are planned as part of a comprehensive plan to accommodate projected growth.
- Consider intermunicipal alternatives when addressing issues related to water supply and wastewater disposal.

## Action Items

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

**TO DO** → Develop or identify model land development regulations and design standards that support denser development in areas with water and sewer services (including infill and mixed-use) and limited development in areas without such services.

**TO DO** → Review highway jurisdictional patterns in Tompkins County.

**TO DO** → Facilitate intermunicipal cooperation in sharing equipment, purchasing materials, and storing materials.

**TO DO** → Evaluate a downtown office plan for future County facility needs.

**TO DO** → Determine the location of future County Health Department facility and the future use of Biggs B building

**TO DO** → Implement the countywide Public Safety Communications System project.

**TO DO** → Renovate and expand the County Public Safety building to meet projected needs.

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### **Tompkins County Planning Department**

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