

# TUG HILL COMMISSION



## STRATEGIC PLAN

2010 - 2014

*Adopted at Commission meeting held on June 30, 2010.*

# NEW YORK STATE TUG HILL COMMISSION STRATEGIC PLAN

2010 – 2014

## INTRODUCTION

This is the fourth strategic plan prepared by the Tug Hill Commission, and once again we emphasize that this is a plan articulated by the board members of the Tug Hill Commission to serve as a guide for the Commission's work over the next four years, as opposed to a plan for the region or our communities. The plan draws upon the input we received from our Local Leaders Survey (2008), as required by the Commission's enabling legislation; the Tug Hill Resident and Landowner Survey and Community Forums (2009), which provided a rich and statistically valid measure of residents and landowners perceptions, priorities and preferences for the region; our dialogue with the region's five Councils of Government (COGs), at COG meetings and the annual Super COG meetings; and, through internal retreats and meetings among the Commission staff, Circuit Riders and Commission Members.

Over the past 37 years the Tug Hill Commission has prided itself on adherence to its mission of "helping local governments and citizens shape the future of the Tug Hill region", and this strategic plan re-affirms our commitment to this approach that has served both us and Tug Hill communities so well. While our nation, state and communities face challenging fiscal times, the Commissioners and staff remain committed to serving the needs of the Tug Hill Region's most important resources – its people and the communities they live in. We also remain committed to the Commission's grassroots, non-regulatory approach to meeting the challenges and opportunities that face us.

Over the past two years we have spent tremendous time and effort to gauge community and resident priorities for the region and for the Commission's programs and services. We foremost want to thank everyone for their invaluable input in this process. This effort reconfirms that the Commission's mission, basic approach and programs and services continue to make sense for the region, our local governments and our residents and landowners. Given limited resources, this strategic plan will make some modest changes in the Commission's programs and services so that we can continue to meet what everyone has articulated to us.

The Commission also acknowledges that this strategic plan is not cast in stone. We will continually adapt to changing circumstances and opportunities and to priorities as conveyed by our local governments. Our programs and services will respond to the dynamics of the region's economy, demands on local governments, and challenges and opportunities that face the region's natural resources and people.

## MANAGING IN FINANCIALLY CHALLENGING TIMES

There is no doubt that since State Fiscal Year 2007-08, New Yorkers have faced financially challenging times, and that has included the Tug Hill Commission. Since 1999 (see Appendix A: Appropriation Trends FY1999 – FY 2011), the Tug Hill Commission budget has averaged about \$1 million annually. Most of this funding (90%) pays for the salaries of 18 staff members, with 10% going for non-personal expenses related to overhead, travel, equipment and support of our Councils of Government.

Since FY 2008-09 the Commission has been funded at a level amount, which is projected to continue for the immediate coming fiscal years. Working within that limit, the Commissioners and staff have been committed to maintaining the same level of service to our communities while the cost of doing business has increased. There is concern, however, that further reductions may result in deficiencies in program performance or loss of entire service sectors.

While the Commission's budget continues to have 18 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) staffing positions (see Appendix B – Organization Chart) we have achieved our budget savings reductions through recurring savings in personal service expenses (which represent 90% of our entire budget), through voluntary reduction in work schedules from some staff and no salary increases or cost of living adjustments for the past two fiscal years. Presently, we also have one management level position (Director of Community & Economic Development) vacancy that we are not allowed to fill because of the statewide hiring freeze.

The Commission does not have the option of cutting programs across the board. We are already to the point where many key program and administrative areas are covered by just one staff person.

Here are a few examples:

- We sustained our Geographic Information System (GIS) for the past 10 years with just one full-time staff person.
- Each of our Councils of Government operates with one full-time staff person.
- Our payroll, accounts receivable, accounts payable and contract administration is supported by one Administrative Aide.

Local funding options for COG services are probably at its maximum already given the rural nature of the communities served. Towns and villages in the Tug Hill region contribute about \$\_\_\_\_\_ annually toward the "Circuit Rider" program, and countless extra in in-kind and volunteer services. Over the past few years every COG has raised membership dues for their municipalities or picked up added expenses for their Circuit Riders. To ask for more is just not realistic for the rural towns and villages – averaging about 1,500 in population and with municipal budgets under \$1 million.

These communities, however, continue to rank the services of the Commission and the Circuit Rider program as extremely valuable to their local governance and delivery of services.

## THE BASICS ARE ESSENTIAL

The 2008 Local Leaders Survey evaluated the Commission's programs and services. We are pleased that local officials feel strongly that our programs and services need to be continued, as these rural communities could not support them individually. The Commission has conducted similar surveys in 1985, 1990, 1994, 1997, 2002 and 2008. Results have been comparable over the years with an overwhelming majority of respondents indicating they wish the Commission programs to continue.

In 2008, for all categories measured for "importance", over 80% of the respondents indicated that the Tug Hill Commission programs were important or essential to the future of the Tug Hill region. For the first time in the history of Tug Hill surveys, helping communities protect the environment ranked highest (96.3%) of all categories as essential or important; followed by: helping communities find money for water, sewer, housing and similar infrastructure (94.5%); workshops to increase skills (93.9%); land use planning assistance (93.9%); and, helping communities find money for parks, recreation and similar community facilities (90.3%). 82.3% of the respondents felt that it was important or essential for circuit riders to attend municipal board meetings.

In rating the "effectiveness" of Commission programs, training and technical assistance (89.1%) and land use planning and zoning (84.7%) rank the highest of all categories. Other top rankings were for helping communities protect the environment (82.3%), finding monies for infrastructure (79.9%) and resources for parks, recreation and downtown development (78.8%).

In ranking characteristics of the Tug Hill Commission, respondents answered the following in terms of excellent, good or fair: Cooperation (96.3%); Understanding Area Needs (95.2%); Expertise (95.1%); Promptness (90.8%); Objectivity (87.9%); and, Innovativeness (86%).

In 2009, the Commission chose to look deeper into the needs of the region, and surveyed local residents and landowners on their attitudes and priorities. When asked about the importance of possible program areas for the Tug Hill Region, 95% felt it was important to focus on natural resources; 89% to focus on community development; and, 79% to focus on land use planning. At the seven community forums following the survey, participants were asked what one or more driving forces they saw affecting the future of the Tug Hill region. Resoundingly and consistently, forum attendees identified concerns about jobs, patterns of development, and recreation as the most significant driving forces.

So what does this tell us? Whether local leaders, landowners, residents or public opinion leaders, we believe this tells us to stick to our mission, keep it simple, and keep up our core program areas – land use, community development, and natural resources. Managing within our resources, the following sets some broad direction and priorities for these program areas:

## Land Use Planning:

Since its inception in 1972, the Tug Hill Commission has placed considerable emphasis on helping the region's towns and villages with land use planning and management of development within their communities. 94% of our local leaders indicate that land use planning assistance is "important" or "essential" to the future of the region and our COGs indicate that they most frequently associate our planning and related technical assistance as what most defines the work of the Commission.

*"When I think of the Tug Hill Commission, the first thing that comes to mind is your work on comprehensive plans and zoning." - COG leader*

The Commission's planning assistance is provided in three general areas:

- **General Planning Assistance** – Assist communities with comprehensive plans and surveys; visioning sessions; strategic plans geared at one or more elements of a comprehensive plan (e.g. economic development, infrastructure, transportation, greenway trails, etc).
- **Local Law and Ordinance Preparation** – Help local officials develop local land use laws and ordinances that implement planning objectives including: zoning, subdivision regulations, site plan review laws and special use permits, among others.
- **Project Review Assistance** – When asked, Commission staff are available to local boards to assist in project and development reviews. Assistance can be informal, such as a call from a board chair or member, or more formal, such as technical comments on development plans or proposals or help in completing environmental reviews as required under the State Environmental Quality Review Act. While Commission staff will never opine on any project proposal, they are available for objective technical support to the governing local board.

The Commission's planning staff remains committed to supporting our communities through these services. In addition, there are some particular planning areas that our communities and COGs have articulated over the past few years.

**Tug Hill Reserve Act Special Areas** – The Tug Hill Reserve Act (Chapter 846 of the Laws of 1992) enables local governments and COGs to identify "Special Areas" vital to protecting natural resources and character landscapes and also limits governmental immunity from certain actions affecting such locally designated areas. In 2009, the Tug Hill Commission working with the region's COGs completed a revision to the definitions of Special Areas for a uniform guidebook for their designation throughout the region. In the next few years the Commission will be working with the Cooperative Tug Hill Council and their communities (as well as any other interested COG and their communities) on designating Special Areas within municipalities. Our planning and natural resources staff will be available to work with individual towns and COGs on pursuing this work. The Tug Hill Reserve Act itself may need some statutory amendments to remove some obsolete provisions and ensure the legislative intent of the Act.

Working with our communities, COGs and State Legislative delegation we will revisit the Act and work on necessary updates.

**Low Volume Roads** – Increasingly Tug Hill towns are working on managing the rural network of low volume unpaved roads that characterize many of our rural areas. The Commission has been working with the State Legislature on legislation to codify the practice of designating Low Volume and Minimum Maintenance Roads and we will continue that effort. In the meantime, we are available to help towns at their request to inventory, map and designate low volume roads.

**Integrating Natural Resource Planning Efforts** – The Commission has been working on a number of natural resource management projects (e.g. Black River and Sandy Creeks Watershed Management Plans, Adirondack-Tug Hill Wildlife Connectivity, etc.) which are completed or nearing completion. If communities are interested we will be available to help towns and villages integrate some of the recommendations of these plans into local comprehensive plans or land use controls. Integrating the results of these planning efforts into local plans and land use regulations is one of the most effective ways of long lasting management of these resources.

### **Community Development**

Helping to build economically vibrant hamlets and villages, ensuring support for the region’s agriculture and forest economies, and leveraging the region’s rural character, heritage and natural resources for a diverse recreation and tourism economy have long been a focus of the Tug Hill Commission’s community development staff. Nearly 95% of our local leaders indicated that the

*“The Tug Commission provides another hand in helping each town become a better place to live in.” – Local leader survey respondent*

Commission’s assistance for finding money for water, sewer and housing as well as parks, recreation and similar community facilities were “important” or “essential” to the future of the region. Similarly, landowners and residents wanted most to see an increase in recreational opportunities and cultural activities throughout the region. The working nature of Tug Hill’s rural landscape is supported by economically viable hamlets and villages that ring the core forest. Our abundance of water resources and recreational opportunities associated with our rural character make the region a prime destination for residents and visitors alike.

To help communities, businesses and individuals build on the region’s assets, the community development staff assist communities with:

- **Infrastructure** – Help communities inventory and manage infrastructure (highways, sewer, water, and broadband) and secure federal, state and local funding to improve those resources for economic development opportunities.

- **Recreation Facilities** – Help communities plan for and develop recreational resources and facilities and securing financing necessary to capitalize them. Our survey respondents and COGs have also placed an emphasis on developing a four season recreation economy for the region.
- **Village and Hamlet Revitalization** – Available to help local revitalization efforts such as historic building preservation, or streetscape or façade improvements on Main Street.
- **Tourism Planning and Development** – Working with partners, we are available to work with communities on efforts to improve and expand the region’s tourism economy and develop resources in a way that diversifies their economic use.

Through our survey work these remain the core competencies our community development staff will focus on. In addition, some projects we would like to advance over the next few years include:

**Infrastructure Inventories and Asset Management** – Access to adequate infrastructure (highways, sewer, waste water and broadband) is a key determinant in whether a community can accommodate growth and development, particularly commercial and service sector development. Without adequate infrastructure or capacity to accommodate growth, too many of our communities are deprived the opportunity for economic development. Working with our COGs we can help communities assess their infrastructure needs and capacity and identify ways to help them accommodate new growth opportunities. Armed with adequate assessments, communities will be prepared to go to their citizens and potential funding sources to advance projects in a timely fashion.

Managing those infrastructure assets to maximize their useful life and ensure that necessary maintenance and upgrades are being implemented is also very important. Increasingly, state and federal funders are requiring communities to implement asset management plans for their infrastructure. If asked, the Commission can help municipalities undertake the necessary asset inventories and audits to prepare an asset management plan, often by helping secure funding assistance. In 2009, the Commission helped Lewis County, working as lead agency with Jefferson County and 13 towns and villages secure a Shared Services Grant to undertake a Joint Infrastructure Management Inventory. Once completed, we believe this asset management effort could provide a template for other communities.

*“Communities should capitalize on what we have in the region: open space, natural resources, recreational and tourism opportunities.” Rodman community forum participant*

**Corridor Investments** – From snowmobile trails to scenic byways, from the Route 3 sewer project to the Black River Blueway Trail, planning efforts that focus on linking communities and resources have been a significant focus of Commission planning efforts. These corridors not only link our villages and hamlets, but they link our tourists and residents to the many assets of the region. Building on

these corridor efforts helps build the vitality of the region’s economy and highlights the region as a destination. Many of the management plans for these corridors are completed, and communities and

organizations are beginning implementation. Community development staff will take the lead on facilitating implementation efforts, but all program areas will be involved where needed.

### **Natural Resources Management**

For the first time in the history of Tug Hill surveys, helping communities protect the environment ranked the highest at 96.3%. In the survey of landowners and residents, 74% of the respondents ranked programs for protecting and managing natural resources as very important. Historically, the people of Tug Hill have been

*“We have great natural resources here: people with a great work ethic, but there are no jobs for them. We need jobs related to our natural resources.” – Boonville community forum participant*

very satisfied with the overall quality of life and the abundance of natural resources that contribute to the region’s character. The natural resources of the region have been, and continue to be, the principle driver in the region’s economy and people have strong traditional values to the resources that surround them. Helping local governments and individuals manage those resources in a way that ensures the rural character of the region and the contribution they have to the economy has always been a primary focus of the Commission’s work.

Over the past several years the Commission’s work regarding natural resources management has fallen into three broad categories:

- ***Watershed Management*** –The Commission has worked with the region’s communities as well as surrounding communities on a series of watershed planning efforts over the past several years. Watershed plans in one form or another have been completed for the Black River, Oneida Lake, Salmon River and Sandy Creeks watersheds and have all made substantial recommendations for improved local management of these watersheds.
- ***Natural Resource Project Implementation*** - While planning for natural resources management is important, the Commission also looks for opportunities to work with communities on implementation projects to demonstrate the balance between resource protection and compatible development. . Implementation projects have included boat launches, stream restoration, and riparian buffer installation,
- ***Working Lands Conservation***– Tug Hill is a working landscape with forest, farmlands, and water resources (used for both energy generation and water supply) all supporting the environmental and economic vibrancy of the region. While management of the region’s natural resources is important for biodiversity and other ecological benefits, it is also important to the human service needs of our economy and quality of life. In general, landowners and residents are very satisfied with the amount of open space in the Tug Hill region, with one in two (50%) rating it as “excellent” and nine in ten (90%) rating it either “excellent” or “good”. Maintaining the rural, open character of the region, however, requires working with private landowners since over 85% of the property in Tug Hill is privately owned. More importantly, these working private lands support the region’s economy and communities. Working with local governments, local



land trusts, sportsman associations and landowner organizations, the Commission has helped to sustain these working landscapes. Understanding how both external and internal forces are influencing the decisions of private landowners is important to ensure that the region can sustain its open space and environmental value while maintaining the economic benefits derived from it.

As with all other program areas of the Commission, Tug Hill landowners, residents, and local leaders want to approach the management of the region’s natural resources from a grassroots, bottom up approach. While they will capitalize on the support of state and federal partners and the numerous regional non-governmental organizations that can help them, they have and will insist that the solutions pursued are locally supported and driven. That makes information and communication a premium in the Commission’s work with communities. Over the next few years we will place emphasis on the following:

*“None of us has the time or resources as planning/zoning board members to do an adequate or fair job. The Commission is our source for advice!”  
– Local leader survey respondent*

***Integrating Natural Resources in Local Plans and Efforts –***

As noted in the planning section, our natural resources staff will work with planning staff to help integrate the results of our natural resources management work into local plans and activities. Whether in support of Special Areas designation, measures to implement watershed management objectives, or locally driven natural resource

restoration projects we will assist willing communities advance and implement local resource management measures and projects.

***Revisit Working Lands*** - As noted above, over 85% of the lands in the Tug Hill region are privately owned and they contribute significantly to the region’s economy and quality of life. In 1991, the Tug Hill Commission completed a document known as “Tug Hill Working Lands”. The “Tug Hill Working Lands” report provided a broad view of the Tug Hill region to help local and state decision makers, residents and visitors to better understand this special part of New York. The report served as a starting point to help people understand the forces that shape the region and to formulate a range of policy options, both public and private, about the future of the region. It was a tremendous resource that resulted in legislative changes, program focus and an array of public and private actions that helped shape the region. Now, 20 years later, the Commission proposes to revisit the “Working Lands” report and see what has changed, what has remained the same, and what can local citizens and others do about changes that are occurring or change that has not occurred. If locally supported, we would devote the next 12-24 months in revisiting the report together with the Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust, our Councils of Government and partner county and state agencies.

## Emerging Local Governance Challenges

Today, more than ever, local governments are faced with governance challenges that are taxing both their capacity to deliver essential services as well as their ability to pay for them. Whether the demands come from local citizens or from state and federal mandates, our rural local governments face some daunting tasks. From property assessment practices to emergency services, from public health to public accountability, the demands on local government seem to be ever increasing. The Tug Hill Commission has always provided information that municipalities need to make good local

*“I believe the Tug Hill Commission should continue, as it is a tremendously valuable resource for local municipalities. It first helps the local governments with answers on planning or funding a project, may pave the way for combining smaller government bodies into larger more efficient run government. Tug Hill Commission offers suggestions and ideas to boards that need out of the box approach at times.” – Local leader survey respondent*

decisions on many issues, either by drawing on the expertise of Commission staff, or by enlisting the assistance of outside experts in the topic at hand. In addition to our Councils of Governments, the Commission has assisted Tug Hill communities in numerous intermunicipal agreements that have promoted greater governance efficiencies or cost savings. From shared planning boards to shared facilities, these efforts have enabled local governments to retain local control over governance and budgets while providing essential services to their constituents. We expect as local governments experience increasing financial pressure and limited resources to provide services, these shared service agreements will grow over time. To help our communities address these emerging challenges we will need to develop and recruit expertise for in-house staff where and when we can. More realistically, however, we will have to broaden our partnership base to help identify appropriate organizations that can provide our municipality’s timely and effective advice on such matters. The Commission will remain committed to helping our communities’ access reliable and unbiased information for any problem or challenge they face, and to supporting home rule.

## Training and Technical Assistance

*“The Tug Hill Commission will hopefully be there in the future to help our towns and villages with the same education and training we have come to know and appreciate.” – Local leader survey respondent*

The Commission’s training and technical assistance to elected and appointed local officials is by far the most sought after service that the Commission provides. Faced with turnover, emerging governance requests and mandates, and an ever changing fiscal environment the demands on local officials seem to be increasing at a time when the desire for public service is ever challenging.

Training and technical assistance also permeates all program areas of the Commission, from planning to natural resources to community development. The Commission will continue to bring the necessary training and technical information to the region’s boards and communities in a variety of venues.

**Annual Local Government Conference** – Our annual local government conference in the early spring continues to grow in both attendance as well as program offerings. While we have nearly exceeded the

capacity of Jefferson Community College to host this, we remain committed to having the conference on an annual basis.

**Training Workshops** - We are always looking for opportunities to host regionally based training throughout all four of our counties. Whether working with county government or academic institutions we will work to bring locally based training closer to our constituents. While we often prefer to train at a more county or regionally based level, we will also remain available to individual boards within our service area to help them with particular training needs. Often this is the best venue to get at locally specific needs and functions.

**Local Leaders Institute** – After seven consecutive years of conducting our Local Leaders Institute, we took a hiatus in 2009-10. In 2010-11 we will bring back the Local Leaders Institute as a means of introducing local leaders to the diversity of the region and to help develop useful leadership skills.

In its technical assistance capacity, the Commission staff and Circuit Riders handle hundreds of technical assistance requests from local elected and appointed officials. Requests can be as simple as a referral to a resource or agency to detailed technical requests that may take days of research to answer. Some requests may actually evolve in to technical papers on a topic that is raised among many constituents. As the Commission has implemented certain technologies (e.g. computers and access to the internet) technical requests are handled by a broader range of program staff. This has challenged our abilities to track and log requests. It has also, enhanced the ability of individuals to respond to a broader range of requests.

Some technical assistance requests have taken on a more programmatic role. For example, Commission staff and our Councils of Government continue to work with local officials on an array of records management efforts under grants from the State Archives and Records Administration (SARA). Annually we submit several records management applications and attract thousands of dollars for local records management efforts. As long as resources are available this will remain an information management priority of the Commission.

Our technical assistance function to our local officials remains very popular and we need to ensure that we develop our abilities to respond to inquiries. We also need to find ways to ensure that we track requests and share among staff more frequently asked questions so we can improve our efficiency and consistency of responses.

### **Technology**

The Commission has made considerable investments in technology applications that both improve the quality of work produced by the staff, and enhance our ability to put critical information in the hands of local officials. We continue to look for better ways to use technology for our own purposes as well as for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of local officials and boards.

The Commission's Geographic Information System (GIS) has evolved substantially over the years. From our GIS Starter Kit on CDs to our web-based Tug Hill Regional Atlas Mapper (THRAM) we have put more

*"Lack of high speed Internet services comes up at town board meetings all the time." – Redfield community forum*

information at the finger tips of local officials than has ever been available. Our challenge now is to help local officials and boards use this technology and make them aware of the potential applications.

More recently, we have turned our efforts with GIS to asset management. Asset management can be defined as managing infrastructure capital assets to minimize the total cost of owning and operating them, while delivering the service levels that customer's desire. Our goal is to help communities bring GIS technology into the management of infrastructure (e.g. highways, water and wastewater facilities) in a way that helps improve operation and management while achieving efficiency and cost savings to taxpayers. In the Tug Hill region, these capital assets are the most costly services provided by local governments and improved efficiency should result in improved economies.

Over the next several years the Commission will continue to invest in our GIS technology to develop new and emerging applications that can be applied at the local level. We will also work with local boards and departments in obtaining the necessary equipment to access GIS information and applications as they need it.

We have also improved our use of electronic data management and communication to improve our communication with local officials. The Commission's data base continues to be invaluable to our ability to communicate among our local officials. Maintaining the data base is also challenging with ever changing positions and occupants in local offices. We continue to work at ways of improving our management of the data base.

Over the past year we have also expanded our use of e-mail for communication with local officials. Today nearly one-third of our Tug Hill Times are sent out electronically and about 25% of our Headwaters annual newsletter. We will continue to strive for less expensive e-mailing but will not completely switch for some time.

### **Regions and Sub-regions**

**Councils of Governments** - The uniqueness of the Tug Hill region and its natural resources were the driving force in 1972 when the State Legislature created the Tug Hill Commission, and our local leaders, landowners and residents continue to value the uniqueness of the region that sets it apart from other parts of New York. The Tug Hill Commission has been a leader in supporting the use of Councils of Governments (COGs) and intermunicipal agreements to help Tug Hill communities work together on problems and opportunities, and to keep a regional perspective in their

*"Projects used to be tailored to what a particular community needs and what is critical for their area because there are a wide variety of communities on Tug Hill." – Rodman community forum participant*

individual community work. The Commission continues to find ways to help towns and villages of the region work on common opportunities and problems.

The existing COGs and their Circuit Riders are the best vehicle for this. The Circuit Riders are a vital communication and technical assistance link between the Commission and the COGs and we continue to look at ways this link remains viable. Over the next 4-7 years, however, every COG Circuit Rider will be eligible for retirement, and we can expect that at least some will retire. Working with our COGs on succession planning will be a priority in the coming years. Although circuit riders have changed in the past, we have never seen the potential for so many turnovers in a fairly short period of time. In addition to succession planning for Circuit Riders our COGs need to work on succession planning for their board members and leaders.

While each of the COGs is an independent intermunicipal entity governed by their own bylaws and boards, the relationship between the COGs, their Circuit Rider, and the Commission is important to ensuring responsiveness to their respective sub-regions and collaboration on region-wide priorities such as Special Areas, Low Volume Roads and overall resource management efforts. In order to help meet the needs of “customer communities” of the region, the Commission will work with the COGs on a number of activities over the next few years, including:

- Providing organizational development assistance to the COGs in the region.
- Improving COG and Commission access to communities through our newsletter The Tug Hill Times and our web pages for the Commission and the COGs.
- Continue regular evaluation of Commission programs and services through the semi-annual Super COG meetings and our once every five year survey of local leaders. The next major survey will be in 2013 in preparation for the report to the Governor and Legislature regarding the importance and benefits of Commission programs and services.
- Report regularly to the people of the region, local officials and statewide officials through the Commissions annual Headwaters report and periodic briefings and summits on key topics important to the region.

***Involvement in Larger Regional Initiatives and Programs*** – While the Tug Hill region has some unique and defining characteristics unto itself, it is also influenced by larger regional dynamics and programs that affect and can benefit Tug Hill communities. The Commission has always been involved in regional activities that go beyond the Commission’s borders and communities. The Commission members and communities have supported these activities so long as they have a tangible and direct benefit to the region’s communities, economy and resources of common interest.

In some cases Tug Hill is part of a substantially larger region such as the Northern Forest which expands from Tug Hill northeast through Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine. Similarly, Tug Hill is part of the Great Lakes Basin which encompasses portions of eight Great Lakes States and two Canadian Provinces.

Given federal financial and institutional support of the Northern Border Commission and the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, the Commission is participating in these programs to help ensure that Tug Hill communities get their fair share of resources and program services from these initiatives.

The Commission also has its statutory obligation to “share its information developed and experience gained in the Tug Hill region that may be usefully shared elsewhere in New York State”. As such, Commission staff is active and involved with a number of regional and statewide associations such as the Adirondack North Country Association, the NYS Legislative Commission on Rural Resources, the Finger Lakes – Lake Ontario Watershed Alliance and many other governmental and non-governmental organizations involved in helping local governments.

We continue to operate under the Commissioners policy for outside region activities. As such, to the extent that these regional and sub-regional activities do not detract from the Commission’s primary mission to its local government constituency, we will maintain our involvement with them.

### **Sustaining Staff Capability**

The Tug Hill Commission and our Commissioners have, like all of our communities, made service to communities the focus of our programs as opposed to bureaucracy and institution building. The past several years have also been very tight on state funding and given the state’s fiscal picture, it is unlikely that increased state funding to support replacing positions lost to attrition and voluntary reductions in work schedule reductions (VRWS), new staff or other expenses at the Commission will be forthcoming.

One of the primary challenges facing the Commission is dealing with succession planning for attrition of staff that has occurred and will occur over the next several years. In the past two years:

- We have had voluntary reductions in work schedule affecting 20% in two positions.
- Lost one Director management position who took employment outside of State government.

These reductions are frozen in VRWS through April of 2011 and there is a hard hiring freeze on our management position for an undetermined period. Over the next 2-3 years we expect some attrition in support staff personnel and in the 4-6 year range see some attrition in Circuit Rider positions (see earlier section on COGs). While these reductions and attrition will help the Commission in tight fiscal times it also presents challenges in losing experienced staff.

The Commission needs to insure that it invests in its key asset – the staff – by providing valuable training and skill development opportunities. Given the workload we have been carrying in the areas of GIS, natural resources planning, helping communities develop and finance infrastructure and our investment in the COG Circuit Rider program, we will be pressed to find additional staffing resources for these efforts. The Commission will also have to deal with training administration staff to handle numerous administrative and support services that tenured staff carry.

To deal with these circumstances and demands, the Commission will work to use personal service savings to help relieve funds for necessary training and skill development. We will also work with Division of Budget to implement transitional position overlap that will result in annual reductions in personal service expenditures but allow us to overlap positions so outgoing personnel can train incoming personnel, particularly in administrative functions. For program staff, we will continue efforts to cross train staff in program areas. For example, this Strategic Plan emphasizes cross training between planning staff and natural resources staff in meeting program goals.

For our Circuit Riders, we have already begun discussions with COGs on how to plan for attrition and succession in Circuit Rider positions. We will work with COG leaders on articulating objectives and goals for Circuit Rider positions and developing skill descriptions that COGs want in their Circuit Rider services.

Above all, we will seek to maintain a lean, but efficient, staffing size and program commitments commensurate to available resources so as to ensure the quality of service brought to our constituents at the least cost.

### **Commission Bylaws and Policies**

As part of the strategic planning process in 2004, the Commission completed a thorough review and update of the Commission bylaws and some policies. Generally, these updates continue to serve the Commission well. Over the past year the Commissioners have reviewed the bylaws and are recommending some amendments in regards to election of Commission officers. These amendments have been drafted and vetted and will be adopted along with this Strategic Plan and in place for the 2010 election of officers. Beyond these changes, the Commissioners have not recommended any further bylaw changes.

The State Division of Budget (DOB) has recommended that all Executive Branch agencies review and amend their vehicle use policies in light of new fuel efficiency and vehicle use recommendations. As part of this Strategic Plan the Commission has drafted a revised vehicle use policy and will be adopted pursuant to DOB direction.

While not a formal policy, the Commission has had guidelines for the designation of Tug Hill Sages. Tug Hill Sages were first designated by the Commission in 1983. The distinction is bestowed upon those individuals who have vast knowledge of Tug Hill's heritage and its environment and have shown a life-long involvement in the region. The Commissioners have honored a number of worthy candidates, each with their own special contribution that they have brought to the region. To date the Commission has bestowed this designation on twenty-six residents of the region. To better help in the nomination of Tug Hill Sages, the Commissioners have revised the guidelines for nominating Tug Hill Sages and adopted them as part of this Strategic Planning process.

## APPENDIX A

### Tug Hill Commission Appropriations Trend FY1999 – FY2011

APPROPRIATION	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004
Personal Services	699,200	779,200	795,900	857,000	849,000
Non-personal Services	107,100	127,100	127,100	101,000	101,000
<b>Total General Fund</b>	<b>806,300</b>	<b>906,300</b>	<b>923,000</b>	<b>958,000</b>	<b>950,000</b>
Special Revenue	12,600	12,600	12,600	33,000	53,000
Number of staff	16	16	16	16	16

APPROPRIATION	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009
Personal Services	904,000	922,000	958,000	1,026,000	1,106,000
Non-personal Services	101,000	104,000	110,000	110,000	110,000
<b>Total General Fund</b>	<b>1,005,000</b>	<b>1,026,000</b>	<b>1,068,000</b>	<b>1,136,000</b>	<b>1,216,000</b>
Special Revenue	53,000	53,000	53,000	53,000	53,000
Number of staff	18	18	18	18	17.8

APPROPRIATION	2009-2010	2010-2011 <sup>1</sup>
Personal Services	1,103,000	1,084,000
Non-personal Services	110,000	110,000
<b>Total General Fund</b>	<b>1,213,000</b>	<b>1,194,000</b>
Special Revenue	33,000	33,000

<sup>1</sup> Governor's Proposed 2010-11 Budget not final



Add Appendix B