

# TUG HILL COMMISSION



## STRATEGIC PLAN

2015 - 2019

*Adopted at Commission meeting held on January 20, 2015.*

# NEW YORK STATE TUG HILL COMMISSION STRATEGIC PLAN

2015 – 2019

## INTRODUCTION

This is the fifth strategic plan prepared by the Tug Hill Commission, and once again we emphasize that this is a plan articulated by the Commission 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 (2013), as required by the Commission’s enabling legislation; our dialogue with the region’s five Councils of Government (COGs), at COG meetings and the fall 2014 Strategic Plan meeting where the regions elected and appointed local officials attended; and, through internal retreats and meetings among the Commission staff, Circuit Riders and Commission Members. Quotes throughout this report in text boxes are from comments received in the Local Leaders Survey.

Over the past 42 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 year 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 (Tug Hill Commission) saves us time, money and enables us to be so much more effective on so many levels. The money spent on THC by the state has to be more than recouped by taxpayers at local level, they pay state taxes too – so it helps all state tax payers by keeping down costs through economy of scale. A few experts helping many towns/villages.”

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 2004 (see Appendix A: Appropriation Trends FY2004 – FY 2014), the Tug Hill Commission budget has averaged about \$1 million annually. Most of this funding (90%) pays for the salaries of staff members, with 10% going for non-personal expenses related to overhead, travel, equipment and support of our Councils of Government.

Since FY 2011-12 the Commission has been funded at a level amount, which is projected to continue for the immediate coming fiscal years. In fact, that FY year the Commission took a 10% cut across the boards (as did all state agencies) and saw a reduction of work force from 18 FTEs to 15 FTEs. Working within these limits, 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.

"I feel they manage their resources extremely well. Our region, I feel, has perhaps more diversity of demands than any in NY state. Our Commission, amazingly, provides support in economic, recreation, environmental and legal aspects of our community. In my community duties I would be less effective without their insight and guidance."

While the Commission's budget continues to have 15 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) staffing positions (see Appendix B – Organization Chart) we continue to operate at 14 FTEs as budgeted under the Commission's "cash ceiling". 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 careful management of limited resources.

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 15 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 \$39,000 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 2013 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, 2008 and 2013. Results have been comparable over the years with an overwhelming majority of respondents indicating they wish the Commission programs to continue.

In 2013, for all categories measured for “importance”, 97% 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, three of our mission’s core programs – *Helping communities protect the environment, Increasing local official governance skills, and Land use planning assistance*, scored equally at 97%. These were followed by: helping communities find money for water, sewer, housing and similar infrastructure (92%); educational programs to increase local citizens and children understand natural/cultural resources (90%); and, helping communities find money for parks, recreation and similar community facilities (91%). 87% of the respondents felt that it was important or essential for circuit riders to attend municipal board meetings.

“The Tug Hill Commission via its circuit riders has always been on top of important issues and passed information to town and village board members.”

In rating the “effectiveness” of Commission programs, training and technical assistance (92%); helping communities protect the environment (88%); and land use planning and zoning (85%) rank the highest of all categories. Other top rankings were for finding monies for infrastructure (82%) and resources for parks, recreation and downtown development (81%).

“The Tug Hill Commission is a much needed resource who has been helpful in creating/encouraging growth and economic development.

In ranking characteristics of the Tug Hill Commission, respondents answered the following in terms of excellent, good or fair: Cooperation (96%); Expertise (94%); Understanding Area Needs (92%); Promptness (91%); Objectivity (89%); and, Innovativeness (83%).

“The Commission has provided services we likely would have had to forgo, in gathering information necessary to developing our new land development laws and updating our comprehensive plan. Their non-biased input has been essential.”

So what does this tell us? Whether local leaders, 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.

One notable increase in our Local Leaders Survey as well as our outreach to local officials and our COGs was the increase in skills development for local officials and in sharing services between municipalities and among our Councils of Government. This is perhaps a large reflection of State policy for real property tax caps, reducing redundancies in local governments and in fiscal responsibility and accountability to tax payers.

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. 97% 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.

“Assistance with planning and zoning since the Tug Hill Commission first began. Just the regular help with planning, zoning, funding (grant writing), GPS units, and computer expertise makes our village government viable!”

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.

- **Training** – The Commission staff, working with the local circuit riders, identify training needs from the local planning and zoning boards to help them meet their four hours of annual training, as required by the NYS statutes. The staff brings local, evening training throughout the region, on request on subjects such as SEQR, site plan review, special use permit review, subdivision review, and zoning board of appeals operations.

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.

**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 and adopt official highway maps. We are also working with communities to integrate their road management practices with their local zoning to ensure that land use along a road is consistent with how the road is maintained.

**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.

“Provide affordable planning and technical assistance to small communities that cannot afford to hire independently. Tug Hill Commission has always helped with our towns questions and needs for guidance on local and state laws. Providing educational and resource for boards.”

### **Community Development**

The Tug Hill Commission’s community development staff have long had an emphasis on helping to shape 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. The 2013 local leaders’ survey results found this area of the Tug Hill Commission’s work of equal importance to planning and natural resources.

Community development staff use a ground-up, participatory approach that helps to identify, prioritize and address unique challenges and opportunities within each community, with the goal in mind to help communities, businesses and individuals leverage their own resources and build upon the region’s rich cultural and natural assets. Core community development activities include:

- **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.
- **Village and Hamlet Revitalization** – Available to help local revitalization efforts such as historic building preservation, or streetscape or façade improvements on Main Street.
- **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.
- **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:

***Improving Access and Quality of Internet and Wireless Service***

Tug Hill is a rural region and still has many areas that are underserved in both internet access and wireless phone service. Staff will work with communities in those areas of Tug Hill to try to bring outside resources and partnerships to bear on improving this communications infrastructure. Access to broadband and dependable cell phone service is critical for public safety and economic development.

***Municipal Asset Management*** - 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.

“Helping/assisting us with our water and sewer projects and technical assistance on issues that concern local government.”

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.

**Continue Corridor Investments-** From snowmobile trails to scenic byways, from the Salmon River Greenway 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 also 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. The management plans for these corridors are completed, and communities and organizations are implementing them in many ways, including marketing, access improvements, and events management. Community development staff will take the lead on facilitating implementation efforts, but all program areas will be involved where needed.

“More recreation and trail systems, ATV, Snowmobile, bicycling, hiking, skiing, and more roads open to recreation.”

### **Natural Resources Management**

Tug Hill's defining characteristic is its remote core forest, along with the water resources that originate there and the agricultural resources that surround it. Historically, the people of Tug Hill have been very satisfied with the overall quality of life and the abundance of high quality natural resources that contribute to the region's character. While the utilization of those natural resources by the residents of the area continues to evolve, the 2013 local leaders' survey results found this area of the Tug Hill Commission's work of equal importance to planning and community development. 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.

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.

Staff works with local partners to preserve the integrity of the natural resources of the Tug Hill for current and future use and enjoyment. Generally, over the past several years, these efforts have fallen into the categories of Watershed Planning, Community Projects and Working Lands Conservation. These can occur at the municipality scale, regional scale, or both.

“Coordinate and help author the Black River Watershed Management Plan. The project would not have been as efficient or thorough if they had not participated in the process so heavily.”

- **Watersheds and Water Resources:** Water is a most important natural resource, especially on Tug Hill. Clean and abundant water is essential for drinking, recreation, providing habitat, irrigation of crops and for businesses. Helping obtain better information about water resources, for example the Tug Hill Aquifer study that has been underway for several years, is a frequent request. Watershed plans have been written in varying formats including the Sandy Creeks Ecosystem-based Management demonstration area, the Black River Watershed Management Plan and the Salmon River Natural Resources Assessment. Commission staff continue to be involved with local Water Quality Coordinating Committees and frequently assist communities seeking to improve their drinking water and sewer systems.
- **Community Focused Work:** Tangible improvements in the quality of or access to natural resources are always in demand in Tug Hill communities. For example, in recent years there has been a demand for assistance in writing tree planting grants, where state resources can be brought to local communities to help them property plan for and secure funding for trees. Communities have worked with staff on improving access to recreational opportunities, incorporating natural resources planning into Comprehensive Plans, and re-adopting updated Special Areas Maps.
- **Working Lands Conservation:** On a region-wide scale, Commission staff work to bring education and resources to local government officials related to invasive species, land use and ownership analyses, open space statewide initiatives, conservation easements and other regional efforts. This works involves developing relationships and maintaining lines of communications with a variety of regional and statewide stakeholders.

Our goals for the next five years continue to build upon community projects, water resources and working lands. Funding for many of these projects (recreational trails, grooming equipment, water and wastewater studies, etc.) will be pursued through the Consolidated Funding Applications by the Commission on behalf of the communities.

**Community Based Focus** - The Commission will continue to seek out funding opportunities for tree planting projects, increasing energy efficiency, studying water and sewer infrastructure, improving recreational opportunities and improving community parks. In addition to grant writing assistance, the Commission will assist the communities with implementing their projects. The Commission should continue to facilitate information sharing, for example, where residents can get the most up-to-date and accurate information about permitting and well reporting.

**Region-wide Focus:**

**Water Resources** – Study of the Tug Hill Aquifer should continue and efforts to complete the USGS Tug Hill Aquifer work should be continued. In addition, the Commission will work with partners to seek out funding for projects that further the goals outlined in the

“Assistance and support to protect the Tug Hill Aquifer.”

region’s watershed plans. These may include water quality improvements, improved recreational opportunities, marketing of the resource and increasing citizen’s access to the resource.

**Recreation** – There are all kinds of recreational activities to partake in on Tug Hill including fishing, hunting, snowmobiling, skiing and snowshoeing. Protecting the quality of the land and water resources is of utmost importance so that recreational activities can continue. Improving waterfront access, especially to waterways such as Oneida Lake and the Black River, will be a focus for the next five years. In addition, the Commission will continue to facilitate discussions and help develop potential projects related to both non-motorized and motorized trails.

“Keep working to facilitate cooperation and understanding among the various agencies, group and municipalities that have a role in improving the quality of life in the Tug Hill area. The way things are now, the more cooperation the better.”

**Land Conservation** – In the next five years, we expect continued discussion about keeping working lands in production. Staff will look at the impacts, real and potential, of forest tax law on local municipalities. The Commission will continue to study trends in the core forest, the changing forest economy, and the impacts the decommissioning of timberlands has had on surrounding communities. It also assists with farmland protection. We will also continue work with partners like Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust to protect land on Tug Hill and near Fort Drum.

**Tug Hill Reserve Act Special Areas** – The Tug Hill Reserve Act (Chapter 846 of the Laws of 1992) enables local governments and COGs to adopt a “Reserve Plan” and 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. The Commission has been working with the Cooperative Tug Hill Council and their communities on updating their Reserve Plan and Special Areas maps. Since the last Strategic Plan, Commission staff has visited 14 of the 16 CTHC towns, with all but two of the towns either completed their update or nearing the completion of their update. This work will continue in the next five years so that all CTHC members will have had the opportunity to adopt new maps. Our planning and natural resources staff will continue to 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 update and clarify 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 revisions. The Commission will also remain available to provide assistance to other COGs in preparing reserve plans and special area maps, as requested.

**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

“Tug Hill Commission’s circuit rider is always a wealth of information and brings a pleasant one on one experience to every board meeting. Since the North Country does not fall under any regional planning council, the Tug Hill Commission has been and will continue to be essential in filling a similar role.”

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 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 government 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. More recently, Tug Hill communities have had to address consolidation issues and the Commission has assisted several communities in this effort. 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.

“Assist in procuring finding grants from archives for records retention and storage. Helped the town post and pass dissolution of the Village of Altmar. Not that this is the most important, but I as a town supervisor received a lot of help from Tug Hill, very dependable group of people. Has been one of the driving forces behind the minimum maintenance road law.”

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 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.

“Tug Hill Commission programs are essential to the rural towns in this area. They provide expertise and experience in areas that we would otherwise not have access to.”

**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.

**Technical Assistance** - 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.

“Probably the most important thing is to provide local municipalities the resources and expertise to improve their decision making and governing in general. This has great benefits in future years.”

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.

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

“Circuit rider attending town board meeting and telling us everything that’s going on.”

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 past 3 years and for the next 4 years, however, every COG Circuit Riders have been or will be eligible for retirement. Working with our COGs on succession planning has been and will remain a priority for the Commission. 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.

“The THC should continue to provide technical and governmental guidance to facilitate local land use planning and protection of the environment. “

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 most recent survey was in 2013 in preparation for the report to the Governor and Legislature regarding the importance and benefits of Commission programs and services which was delivered to them in early 2014.

- 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 Economic Development Councils (REDCs)*** – 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.

“Providing technical assistance on all matters of local, county and state government.”

The Tug Hill region includes portions of three of the new Regional Councils – Central New York (Oswego County), Mohawk Valley (Oneida County) and the North Country (Jefferson and Lewis Counties). While some may view this as fractionalizing the Tug Hill region, we actually view this as an economic reality that we have lived with for decades. Tug Hill is a unique geologic and natural resource area of New York recognized by Congress and the New York State Legislature, but economically it, like other rural areas of the State, has binding ties to the economies and communities that surround it. So goes the economy of Syracuse, Utica-Rome, Oswego and Watertown, so goes a portion of the Tug Hill economy.

Nevertheless, the ability of Tug Hill communities to collaborate within the unique relationship established through the Tug Hill Region enabling legislation and the Tug Hill Commission for the long-term stewardship of the region depends upon our ability to effectively communicate our regional priorities and needs to the State and Federal government, non-profit organizations and our local towns and villages. Unlike other significant resource regions of New York such as the Adirondacks and Catskills whose regional effectiveness has relied on regulation and acquisition, the Tug Hill region has depended upon an approach of collaboration between the State and local governments. A collaboration that we believe has produced tremendous regional and statewide benefits without the litigious and regulatory contentions in other regions.

Over the past three years the Commission and Tug Hill region have added substantially to the efforts of the 3 REDCs. Tug hill Commission staff have been active participants in the REDC State Agency resource teams, provided staff expertise to all three REDCs and developed policy papers for the REDCs to consider in their establishment of priorities for plans and projects.

***Statewide and Interstate regional Efforts*** - 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 Commissioner’s 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.

“I hope they will continue for a long time. I feel there is a strong need for their help and support.”

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 three 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.
- Lost two FTEs (one Natural Resources Specialist and one Secretary) to reduction of work force.
- Been unable to fill one target position (Community Development Specialist) due to “cash ceilings”.

These reductions are fully consistent with the Governor’s commitment to keep state annual spending growth under a 2% and in ensuring that state agencies are as lean as possible while still delivering core missions and efficiencies. The Commission is committed to being a leading state agency when it comes to fiscal restraint and efficiency.

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 lose the source of networking and communication would be a heavy blow to our upstate communities.”

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, Policies and Procedures**

Over the years the Commission has continuously adapted its policies, bylaws and procedures to ensure that we maintain the most current employee policies and keep with changing business procedures. Increasingly, the Commission has streamlined its policies to those that govern Management Confidential employees and Civil Service requirements. The Commission has also kept current on ethic policies and training that have changed greatly in the past five years. As part of the strategic planning process in 2014, the Commission completed a thorough review and update of the Commission bylaws and some policies. Generally, these updates continue to serve the Commission well.

The Commission has also fully implemented the Statewide Financial Services procedures for state agency finances and in the past two years has adopted all business service requirements of the Business Services Center. While these have streamlined procedures there have been difficulties in maintaining the fiduciary independence of the Commission from its host agency, the Department of State. DOS and Division of Budget have worked closely with Commission members and staff to ensure the financial and

fiduciary independence of the Commission while streamlining agency efficiencies in these new structures.

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 – FY2015

01/15/15

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>	2011-12 <sup>2</sup>	2011-2012 <sup>3</sup>	2012-2013 <sup>4</sup>	2012-13 <sup>5</sup>
				<i>"Cash Ceiling"</i>		<i>Cash Ceiling"</i>
Personal Services	1,103,000	1,084,000	994,000	866,000	969,150	\$842,000
Non-personal Services	110,000	110,000	110,000	83,000	107,250	83,000
<b>Total General Fund</b>	<b>1,213,000</b>	<b>1,194,000</b>	<b>1,104,000</b>	<b>949,000</b>	<b>1,076,400</b>	<b>925,000</b>
Special Revenue	33,000	33,000	33,000	33,000	33,000	33,000
Number of staff	16.6	15	15	15 (12)	15	15

APPROPRIATION	2013-14	2013-14 <sup>6</sup>	2014-15	2014-2015 <sup>7</sup>
		<i>"Cash Ceiling"</i>		<i>"Cash Ceiling"</i>
Personal Services	969,000	842,000	969,000	842,000
Non-personal Services	108,000	83,000	108,000	83,000
<b>Total General Fund</b>	<b>1,077,000</b>	<b>925,000</b>	<b>1,077,000</b>	<b>925,000</b>
Special Revenue	33,000	33,000	33,000	33,000
Number of staff	15	14	15	14

<sup>1</sup> Staffing level reflects RIF of 12/31/10

<sup>2</sup> Reflects Appropriation as included in Final Budget with a 10% reduction from 2010-11

<sup>3</sup> Reflects DOB "cash ceiling" from 2010-11 cash levels from Legislative Appropriation. Additional 9% reduction. Necessitates transfer of PS to NPS to support essential program needs.

<sup>4</sup> Reflects 2.5% reduction from 2011-12 appropriation as part of Executive directive for recurring agency deficit savings.

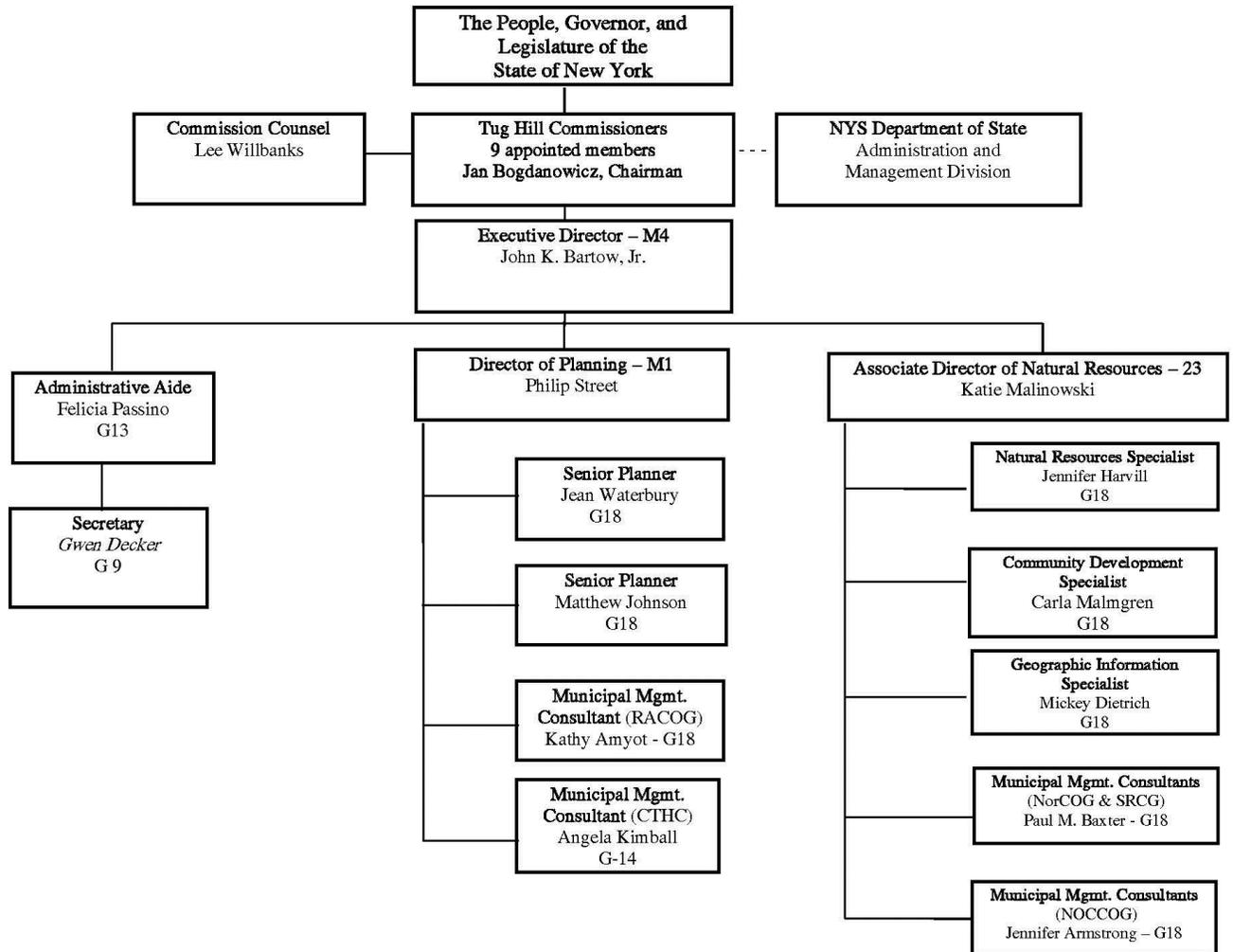
<sup>5</sup> Reflects a 2.5% reduction from 2011-12 Cash Ceiling and an overall 14% reduction from Appropriation.

<sup>6</sup> Staffing level reflects RIF of 12/31/10

<sup>7</sup> Reflects DOB "cash ceiling" from 2010-11 cash levels from Legislative Appropriation. Additional 9% reduction. Necessitates transfer of PS to NPS to support essential program needs.

# Appendix B

## TUG HILL COMMISSION Organization Chart – January, 2015



# Appendix C

## Tug Hill Region Councils of Governments

