



TUG HILL COMMISSION TECHNICAL PAPER SERIES

TUG HILL COMMISSION

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WHY PREPARE A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN?

The New York State zoning enabling legislation provides a definition of a comprehensive plan and a process for adopting one (Town Law Section 272-a and Village Law Section 7-722). Towns and villages would benefit from taking advantage of these statutes by preparing a formal comprehensive plan. Several reasons are outlined below.

The plan provides a process for citizen involvement in a shared vision for the future of the community.

The planning process provides an opportunity for a wide spectrum of the community to be involved with shaping the community's physical and economic future. Opportunities for involvement often come through public opinion surveys, public information meetings and hearings, and attendance at committee meetings. A planning process may also involve activities such as design charettes, which provide opportunities for more interactive involvement of key citizens with special expertise.

The plan provides a legal foundation for, and coordinates land use regulatory activities.

There are numerous discretionary decisions made by the local boards and officials during the zoning implementation and administration process. For example, the town or village board is responsible for rezonings and text amendments consistent with the overall vision which the law is carrying out; the planning board may be responsible for the administration of site plan reviews, special permits and subdivision reviews; the zoning board of appeals is responsible for variances and interpretations of the law. These discretionary decisions all require some knowledge of a greater vision of the community. A written comprehensive plan offers a way to coordinate these decisions amongst local boards and officials and ensure that they are in concert with a common vision for the community.

The plan coordinates capital projects carried out by the community.

The community owns and controls various physical infrastructure improvements. These may include roads; streets; sidewalks; street trees; utilities such as water, sewer and lighting; community buildings, parks, and other meeting places; and police, fire and other public safety facilities. A written plan provides a means of coordinating the construction, expansion, contraction, or decommissioning of these facilities in a coordinated fashion, taking into account the overall goals and vision of the community. A plan also aids a community in assessing the impacts of potential community facilities on development patterns and the local economy.

The plan positions the community advantageously for loans/grants.

There are many organizations that can provide loans and grants to communities for specific projects. The availability of these funds often depends on there being a larger scheme or vision into which the intended project is a part. A written comprehensive plan can often provide evidence that a particular project is part of a larger overall scheme, which is well thought out, in keeping with the overall vision of the community, and may involve other funding stages in the future.

The plan informs other agencies and levels of government of community desires.

The NY statutes require that all plans for capital projects of other governmental agencies take a local comprehensive plan into consideration. A written plan serves as notice to other levels of government and other governmental agencies what the community wants, needs, and expects of them.

The plan streamlines State Environmental Quality Review (SEQR).

A comprehensive plan may be designed to serve as a generic environmental impact statement. If done so, development projects which are in conformance with the comprehensive plan have no further need to comply with the SEQR process, speeding up development approvals.

The plan acts as tool for promoting an appropriate image of the community.

A well-prepared plan can act as a community marketing tool, encouraging appropriate private and public investment. By providing a positive current image and an optimistic vision, the plan can act as a catalyst for both local and outside resources to be marshaled to best benefit the future considered most desirable to the residents.

A NOTE ON STRATEGIC PLANNING

While a comprehensive plan provides an excellent vehicle to articulate a long-range vision of the future, there are numerous steps to be taken to get there. A strategic or programmatic plan is a useful tool to spell out the various projects and programs which will be necessary to achieve the plan. Such a strategic plan is often usefully included in a comprehensive planning document as one of the elements. A strategic plan can set forth a plan for managing specific action items or tasks. Often, communities will produce an “implementation matrix” which lists the action items, their relative priority, the schedule for carrying them out, and the persons or organizations responsible for either carrying them out or tracking their progress.

The Tug Hill Commission *Technical and Issue Paper Series* are designed to help local officials and citizens in the Tug Hill region and other rural parts of New York State. The *Technical Paper Series* provides guidance on procedures based on questions frequently received by the Commission. The *Issue Paper Series* provides background on key issues facing the region without taking advocacy positions. Other papers in each series are available from the Tug Hill Commission at the address and phone number on the cover.