

# Tug Hill Commission



## Strategic Plan

2005 - 2009

**New York State Tug Hill Commission  
Strategic Plan**

**2005-2009**

**Why a Strategic Plan:**

Quoting Ed McMahon of The Conservation Fund (speaker at the 2003 Tug Hill Local Government Conference) “failure to plan is planning to fail,” but more importantly so many of our communities in the Tug Hill region plan for themselves. This is the third strategic plan for the Tug Hill Commission and we emphasize that this is a plan articulated by the Commissioners to serve as a guide for the Commission’s work over the next four years (as opposed to a plan for the future of the Tug Hill region or its communities). As with any plan, it is not cast in stone. Instead, it is intended to be dynamic and will be revised as the Commissioners and staff respond to the local leaders and the needs of the region.

The Commission has, and will continue, to seek input through our Local Leaders Surveys, meetings with community and civic leaders and consultations with the Councils of Governments (COGs) as we implement the priorities and course of action set forth in this plan. We also will respond to the priorities and circumstances that face our constituents.

*“Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.” Peter Drucker*

**Sustaining the Mission:**

The New York State Tug Hill Commission was created in 1972 as the Temporary State Commission on Tug Hill by state legislation Chapter 972, Laws of 1972. That legislation charged the Commission with studying the region and recommending means of protecting its environment and strengthening its economy for the long term.

In 1976, after rounds of public meetings throughout the region, the Commission recommended a program of technical assistance to help them, singly and together, protect the environment and strengthen the economy through local action. In the years since, the Commission’s legislation has been renewed several times (as its legislation “sunset”), each time reconfirming its mission regarding the economy, environment and local action. In 1998, the Commission’s legislation was again renewed (this time removing its sunset provision) with essentially the same mission.

*“The purpose of the commission is to enable local governments, private organizations, and individuals to shape the future of the Tug Hill region, and to demonstrate and communicate ways that this can be done by other rural areas. Commission programs are geared toward the conservation and productive use of the natural resources of the region, strengthening the long-term economy, employment, cultural and social resources, and the general well-being of the rural communities.” Executive Law Article 37, Section 847-a – Statement of legislative findings and purpose; Chapter 440 of the Laws of 1998*

***DRAFT***

*NYS Tug Hill Commission Strategic Plan – 2005-2009  
November 4, 2004*

Each of these reconfirmations of mission makes sense in that local communities and residents support this role for the Commission as demonstrated by the Commission’s Local Leader Surveys and its regular community surveys. As this strategic plan lays out modest changes in the Commission’s programs and sets direction as staff carry out their daily work, the Commission recognizes that local leaders have regularly rated the Commission’s “basic” programs highest. They have found Commission services for land use planning assistance, helping in finding money for key community investments (e.g. water and sewer facilities, parks and “downtown” revitalization activities), skill development workshops, and the Annual Local Government Conference most important to them. These too will remain “most important” to us.

The Commission’s mission also makes sense in terms of statements of state and national policy. For example, the State’s open space plan recognizes Tug Hill as one of the State’s important natural resource areas. At a national level, the U.S. Forest Service has recognized Tug Hill as part of the “Northern Forest” where traditional uses of the land and traditional land ownership patterns ought to be retained.

The Commissioners are also reaffirming this commitment to the basic mission by updating the Commission’s Mission Statement simultaneously with adoption of the strategic plan. While change is inevitable, as most recently seen with the Commissioners hiring a new executive director (the third in the history of the Commission), the Commissioners and staff affirm that our highest priority is to serve the needs of the Tug Hill Region’s most valuable resources – its people and the communities they live in.

*“I have found that great people do have in common ... an immense belief in themselves and in their mission. They also have great determination as well as an ability to work hard. At the crucial moment of decision, they draw on accumulated wisdom. Above all, they have integrity.”* Yousuf Karsh

In addition to its basic enabling statute, the Tug Hill Commission has a few other statutes that bear on our work. They include the Tug Hill conservation easement legislation (section 583 of the Real Property Tax Law) which amends the Real Property Law to ensure payment of taxes on all conservation easements purchased under Article 49 of the Environmental Conservation Law; the Tug Hill Reserve Act (Chapter 846 of the Laws of 1992) which enables local governments and COGs to identify “Special Areas” vital to protecting natural resources and character landscapes and also limits government immunity from certain actions affecting such designated areas; and, most recently, an amendment to the Public Service Law (Chapter 72 of the Laws of 2004) designating the Tug Hill Commission with “Party Status” for the siting of major transmission facilities under Article 7 of the public Service Law.

Under the latest statutory responsibility the Commission will, as part of this strategic plan, adopt a policy governing its party status under Article VII of the Public Service Law – Siting of Major Transmission Facilities. In summary, this policy states that the Tug Hill Commission adopts a position of neutrality in its role under any Article VII proceeding and uses its position as a “party” to stay informed of any proceeding regarding a major transmission facility in the region and to use its designation and receipt of information to ensure effected municipalities are informed during any siting

process. This statute does not give the Commission any regulatory authority or the ability to hold hearings on any siting in the region.

**Establishing, Maintaining and Building on Partnerships:**

The Commission’s programs servicing the region’s 62 towns and villages rely on a basic team approach comprised at its core with 14 specialists based in its Watertown office and 4 full-time and several part-time circuit riders serving the four Councils of Governments (COGs). While this core team is a major asset, it is finite. To maximize services and benefits to the region the Commission relies heavily on a myriad of partnerships. The Commission’s most important partnership is the partnering we are able to establish with our communities and is most evident in the partnership we have with our COGs. In addition, the Commission has a long-standing tradition of partnering with public agencies and the private sector to leverage resources (both human and financial), expertise and skills to help meet the needs of the region’s communities.

One of our core partners in the public sector is the New York Department of State. The Department of State provides administrative help to the Commission, as established in the Commission legislation of 1998. In addition to the administrative help DOS now provides us, their Local Government Division, Coastal Division and Counsel’s Office provide technical assistance to the Commission and financial assistance to the region’s communities. Other key state and federal partners include: N.Y.S. Department of Environmental Conservation (Regions 6 and 7 as well as Albany central staff); N.Y.S. Environmental Facilities Corporation; N.Y.S. Department of Transportation; Empire State Development Corporation; N.Y.S. Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation; N.Y.S. Department of Agriculture and Markets; N.Y.S. Education Department; New York Sea Grant; N.Y.S. Office of the Comptroller; Hudson River/Black River Regulating District; USDA Rural Development; and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Through these partners we are able to not only increase efficiencies in Commission services, but to bring substantial resources to help meet the needs of our communities. Last year alone, the Commission and these partners brought more than \$40 million in financial assistance for sewer and water projects alone during a 10-year period.

The Commission has also partnered for many years with public and private universities. Whether it be Jefferson Community College who hosts our annual Local Government Leaders Conference or the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry who has offered research and graduate student interns over the years to aid our communities, these institutions have come to provide invaluable assistance to the Commission. Other institutions that the Commission has partnered with recently include: Clarkson University; Syracuse University; SUNY Potsdam; SUNY Oswego and Paul Smiths College.

The Commission also relies heavily upon our local government partners for enhanced services to the region. Key local government partners include the four county governments in the region and their: industrial development agencies; county planning departments; soil and water conservation districts and farmland protection boards. In addition, there are numerous town and village

*“I know of no better repository of the ultimate powers of society than the people themselves, and if we find them exercising those powers without wholesome discretion the solution is not to take the power from them but to inform their discretion.”* Thomas Jefferson

clerks, code enforcement officers, economic development specialists and attorneys whose help is invaluable as well as generous. Our town and village elected officials, of course, are our key leaders. They truly are the “change makers” within the region and their support is invaluable to the Commission’s purpose.

In the private sector, the Commission establishes partnerships with both not-for-profit and for-profit corporations. In the not-for-profit arena the Commission works extensively with: Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust; The Nature Conservancy; The Northern New York Community Foundation; Pratt-Northam Foundation; Adirondack North Country Association; Association of Towns of N.Y.S.; New York Planning Federation; and, American Planning Association. These partners not only bring financial resources to communities, but also technical assistance to the Commission’s planning and training services.

Increasingly, the Commission is also partnering with private for-profit corporations to help bring resources and services to the region. For years, Harden Furniture, Inc., has provided both technical and financial resources to projects in the region. Other corporate partners in the region include: Atlantic Renewable Energy Corporation; Pragma Partners; Niagara Mohawk Power Corporation (a National Grid Corporation); 3-B Timber; Reliant Energy Corporation (now Brascan); International Paper; Iroquois Gas Transmission Services; and many other corporate and small business enterprises.

Another major state and federal partner have been the State Legislators and federal Congressional delegation who serve the region. These partners have provided immense support for the Commission over the years and their service to the regions communities has been outstanding. The Commission has been able to help our legislators by administering financial grants they provide to local governments and community-based organizations and by providing background information on issues shared by communities in the region, which often result in legislation.

Through these partnerships the communities not only get access to resources, but the Commission is able to educate partners on the unique issues of our rural communities. In many instances, we have influenced bureaucracies so they can better accommodate the concerns and opportunities of our region. The Commission will continue to rely on these and other partnerships to keep the work it does for Tug Hill towns and villages of high quality at low cost.

### **Financing, Sustaining and Leveraging the Region’s Infrastructure:**

For years the Commission and our communities have placed a high priority on planning for and obtaining resources to improve and expand the region’s infrastructure. Predominantly, we have focused on the traditional infrastructure of our communities such as sewer, water and transportation, as noted above. In addition, we have helped communities obtain financing for highway corridors, municipal buildings, fire halls, public parks, and many other community facilities. More recently, we have increased our work with communities on high-speed telecommunications initiatives.

Through this strategic plan, the Commission would like to encourage the staff and our communities to broaden their consideration and perception of the region's infrastructure. What we mean to suggest is a more holistic view of infrastructure projects as more than just a single project initiative. Taken by themselves, a community's sewer or water project, or a new town hall, are a once-in-a-generation project. But in a more comprehensive, or enlightened view, these projects mark a striking moment for a community to plan for and build upon a single project. We need to view these opportunities not as just a band-aid for a single problem, but an opportunity to add to the community fabric that creates economic opportunity and improved quality of lives for our residents. For example, a new sewer project is more than a solution to a water quality or public health problem; it is also an opportunity to accommodate new growth and economic activity. If planned for and managed, this single project can be a catalyst for a much broader community agenda.

*“Infrastructure - The substructure or underlying foundation, especially basic installations and facilities on which the continuance and growth of a community depends.” Webster's New World Dictionary*

With respect to broadening our infrastructure considerations we want to introduce to local leaders the concept of “green infrastructure” and its economic and environmental benefits to the region. Typically, the term infrastructure is thought of as the roads, sewers, utility lines and other “gray infrastructure,” or hospitals, schools, senior citizen centers and other “social infrastructure.” Taken together these are termed “built infrastructure.” More recently, a number of planners are talking about another infrastructure that also defines, constrains and presents opportunities for a region: “green infrastructure.” The Conservation Fund has defined green infrastructure as: “our nation's natural life support system - an interconnected network of waterways, wetlands, woodlands, wildlife habitats and other natural areas. These include greenways, parks, and other conservation lands; working farms, ranches and forests; and wilderness, and other open spaces that support native species, maintain natural ecological processes, sustain air and water resources and contribute to the health and quality of life for America's communities and people.”

Tug Hill has thousands of acres of state forests, parks and wildlife management areas; is host to watersheds that provide drinking water supplies to our communities as well as metropolitan areas outside the region; and has renewable and nonrenewable energy resources that have helped the region's economy and have tremendous value to the region's future. Tug Hill abounds in fish and wildlife and its environs are a recreational haven for tens of thousands of tourists each year. The quality character of this region is also why many of us call this place home!

The Tug Hill region also supports over one million acres of working landscape that supports a multi-million dollar agriculture and forest industry. Thousands of employees and entrepreneurs make a living and sustain their families working the lands of the region.

The region's green infrastructure as much defines the region as does other physical infrastructure and we need to plan for, manage, and sustain the use of this green infrastructure no less than we do for our built infrastructure. It, too, underlies the economic engine of our region.

Over the next few years, we will be training and coordinating our staff teams to broaden our own planning approaches and, when asked, we will work with communities on green infrastructure planning as a stage in developing comprehensive plans and in local planning efforts for roads, sewers, water lines and other essential gray infrastructure. We also believe that this concept of “green infrastructure” is consistent and complementary to the “special area” provisions of the Tug Hill Reserve Act.

### **Improving Efficiency Through Technology:**

The Commission has made considerable investments in technology applications that not only benefit the efficiency and quality of work produced by the staff, but also enhances our capability to put maps and other crucial information in the hands of local leaders still faster and cheaper. Our Geographic Information System (GIS), use of e-mail, and the Internet have made access to information faster and more useful in our internal communications as well as the planning services we offer municipalities.

The Commission’s website, as well as those of our Councils of Government, has become a regional information network that serves as a clearinghouse for citizens and local officials to go for information. Our GIS Starter Kit has put a wealth of data in the hands of local planning boards and our ability to produce maps on the GIS has significantly enhanced our grant writing capabilities. The Commission

*“Technology ... is a queer thing. It brings you great gifts with one hand, and it stabs you in the back with the other.” C.P. SNOW*

has made innovative use of technology over the past years, providing very modern technological capabilities to small, rural communities that might not otherwise have access to such tools.

Commission staff and the circuit riders are also working with our local municipal clerks on information management projects under grants from the State Archives and Records Administration (SARA) to bring technology and information management to new levels. We are working with numerous communities on high-speed telecommunications projects that are bringing technology not only to our town halls but also to homes and businesses in our communities. In our partnerships with the Development Authority of the North Country, Niagara Mohawk and USDA Rural Development, we are seeking creative ways to bring technologies into communities throughout Tug Hill.

Our investments in improving efficiency through technology, both at the Commission and in the communities, is stretching existing staff as well as our resources available to invest in computer and GIS equipment and training. Our investment, however, has made us a go-to agency for technology and we will be looking to generate additional revenues to support and expand this capability. With new “special revenues” we will be able to sustain the necessary staffing levels and ongoing investments in hardware and software to keep us on the cutting edge of an ever-evolving technological field. We will also continue to bring technology to our communities at little or no cost to them.

Over the next two years, the Commission will be investing in our GIS to develop web based GIS applications. Getting our GIS to the web will enable local governments immediate access to real time data. We will also work with local boards in obtaining the necessary equipment to access the GIS

information, as they need it. For example, a planning board could use the web based GIS for project reviews during an actual meeting.

### **Better Preparing Local Leaders and Citizens:**

The Commission currently uses a host of tools to provide educational opportunities for local officials, including its annual Local Government Conference, nearly a dozen evening workshops each year, a series of technical papers (some done in conjunction with the N.Y.S. Department of State), issue papers, and a large inventory of educational materials available to local officials. Each of these tools is well established, and is well received by local officials, based on workshop evaluations and the Commission's Local Leaders Surveys.

*“Leadership should be born out of the understanding of the needs of those who would be affected by it.”* Marian Anderson

This year also marks our third year of the Tug Hill Local Leaders Institute. This more intensive training format allows local leaders in government and civic organizations to meet several times over non-summer months for an in-depth look at Tug Hill as a region, and more concentrated training in effective meeting techniques, conflict resolution and leadership skills.

In partnership with not-for-profit and sister governmental organizations, the Commission also provides materials for the public and students in annual conservation days. We are also partnering with New York Sea Grant and our county soil and water conservation districts on a range of water quality and watershed management training and public education campaigns.

Helping current community leaders and training future leaders remains an important part of the Commission's efforts in carrying out its mission. It is also staff time intensive, subject to the problems of the region's challenging weather, and requires constant updating of materials.

To deal with these problems, the Commission has made more use of distance learning technologies, and will try all the more to develop tools that allow others to be the trainers and teachers. The Commission also works closely with other state and local agencies to coordinate training in our region on behalf of our communities.

### **COGs and Super COG:**

Our COGs and the annual gathering of all of them as one Super COG have been a model of grass roots engagement and intermunicipal cooperation to help rural communities work together on problems and opportunities, and to keep a regional perspective in their individual community's work. The Commission needs to continue to find ways to help towns and villages work on common opportunities and problems. We

*“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world, indeed it is the only thing that ever has.”* Margaret Mead

also need to find efficient ways of communicating with our towns and villages so we can be increasingly responsive to local needs. The COGs and their circuit riders is a perfect vehicle for doing this.

As mentioned earlier, we are also looking for new ways to enhance our educational and training programs to be more responsive to local circumstances and needs. We will be strategizing with the COGs on ways that together we can offer new venues for local training. We will also continue the *Tug Hill Times* on a bi-weekly basis as a way to disseminate timely information to our COG representatives and local leaders.

The circuit riders are a vital communication and technical assistance link between the Commission and the COGs and we continue to look at ways to ensure this link remains viable. Under the direction of the COG Executive Committees we also have been having more circuit riders come on board as Commission employees. Today, three of the four full-time circuit riders are Tug Hill Commission employees, and we continue to work on bringing the fourth circuit rider under the same arrangement. This is a valuable arrangement for employee retention, recruitment and compensation. To strengthen this outstanding relationship, the Commissioners are drafting, for the first time, a COG/circuit rider program policy that reaffirms the importance of COG input, maintains our responsiveness to their respective needs and concerns, and formally adopts the principles that have historically guided our service to the region's COGs. The COGs will continue to oversee and manage the workloads and priorities of the circuit riders. The COGs will also continue to support the circuit rider program through local cost sharing. We do hope, however, that through greater communication with the COGs in terms of work programs and performance reviews, we can further the relationship between the Commission and the COGs. The Commission will be sharing the draft policy with the COGs and Super COG prior to its adoption.

### **Region and Subregions:**

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. Yet, for generations, residents of the region have been challenged by and valued the quality of life we share. Whether geologically or demographically, meteorologically or economically there is something that remains the tie that binds us to a regional focus with unified actions. For over 30 years, the individuals, local governments and private sector leaders have banded together to learn, manage and improve the quality of life for residents and resources of the entire region. The Commission's approach is viewed by many as a model for fostering environmental protection and appropriate rural economic development in a way that retains "home-rule" by local government by empowering individual communities to respect and respond to the needs of an entire region.

<p><i>“Geography has made us neighbors. History has made us friends. Economics has made us partners. And necessity has made us allies. Those whom nature hath so joined together, let no man put asunder.”</i> John Fitzgerald Kennedy</p>
--

To help us gain a better sense of the region as a whole and to further empower our communities to respond to the pressures and dynamics that shape us, the Commission proposes to undertake a full

regional assessment of the economic, social and environmental indicators over the next few years. The outcome of this assessment will include:

- an atlas of the Tug Hill Region available to local governments and the public as an educational asset and promotional tool;
- an established baseline of economic, social and environmental indicators that will serve as a foundation for our GIS system;
- an established set of indicators that can be monitored over time and used by local officials in comprehensive planning activities;
- a tool to be used by the COGs in establishing priorities within their regions and for educating the public and local leaders.

The Tug Hill Commission also has several projects underway at a subregional level that look at natural resource management and community development across community boundaries. Its work on the Black River Initiative and Blueway, East Branch of Fish Creek, Cooperative Tug Hill Council Resource Inventory and the Salmon River Watershed are all examples. Some of this work necessitates that the Commission even work beyond its legislatively established boundary (e.g. many of the watersheds within the region go beyond this boundary). Recognizing that to fully understand what happens within a subregion may require the Commission to work with non-Tug Hill communities, the Commissioners have adopted an Outside Region

Policy that effectively guides the staff in how their work can benefit outside communities while still

*"I hate to skate to where the puck is going to be, not where it has been."*  
Wayne Gretzky

devoting the majority of Commission resources to member communities. This policy recognizes that in order for Tug Hill communities to effectively respond to issues and opportunities that face them they often will have to take into consideration forces and circumstances beyond the region.

In some cases Tug Hill is part of a substantially larger region such as the Northern Forest, which expands from the Tug Hill northeast through Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine. We are also a substantial part of New York's Great Lakes basin, which is shared by seven other states and two Canadian provinces. The Commission actively participates in regional forums that are shaping state and federal policy that benefits these multi-state regions. Our goal is to ensure that emerging policy reflects the needs of our communities and provides resources that benefit our communities.

Collaborating both within the region and in limited instances beyond the region increases the chances of success by bringing in all those with a stake in the future of a river, watershed or other significant resources such as broad expanses of forestland. It also makes the best use of Commission staff resources and significantly enhances the success of attracting resources that benefit our communities. For success and cost savings, the Commission anticipates further use of collaborative regional projects over the next several years.

### **Sustaining Staff Capability:**

The Tug Hill Commission and our Commissioners have, like all of our communities, made service and benefits 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 fiscal picture, it is unlikely that increased state funding to support new staff or other expenses at the Commission will be forthcoming. It is clear, however, that increases in recurring expenses are a key part of supporting Commission programs. For instance, the Commission's goals for using technology to improve product and increase benefits to local government cannot work unless there are the means to replace, upgrade and expand equipment on a regular basis. Similarly, if we are to undertake some of the regional projects outlined in this strategic plan, we will need to look outside the agency for resources to support them.

*"You can accomplish much if you don't care who gets the credit."* Ronald Reagan

The Commission also 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 to sustain these efforts. The Commission will also face continuing attrition in staff as several members near retirement age.

To deal with these circumstances and demands, the Commission will work to obtain modest state appropriations together with obtaining resources through our partners. We will aggressively seek federal funding appropriations to undertake projects and work with foundations and other not-for-profits to augment existing resources. If there is the opportunity for new staffing, we will have to consider, for some positions, project jobs that are dependent on continuing project funding as opposed to general fund recurring items. 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.