

HEADWATERS

NEW YORK STATE TUG HILL COMMISSION

2013 NEWSLETTER - 2012-13 ANNUAL REPORT - Issue 50

Inside this issue

Black River Initiative2

Tug Hill Local Government
Fiscal Challenges and
Opportunities3

COG Updates4

Conservation Partner
of the Year6

2013 Local Leaders
Survey7

Commission Programs
and Funding.....7

Commission Continues
Training8

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COMMISSION'S 40TH ANNIVERSARY

Nearly 100 local officials and dignitaries, volunteers and their families joined staff and Commissioners in May of 2013 to celebrate the Tug Hill Commission's 40th anniversary. The Tug Hill Commission was created by state legislation in 1972 and held its first meeting in 1973, after its initial members were appointed by the Governor and State Legislative leaders. The Commission has used the 1973 inaugural meeting as its anniversary and has celebrated each of its decade milestones.

This year's keynote address was delivered by NYS Department of Environmental Conservation Executive Deputy Commissioner Marc Gerstman. His message stressed the importance of partnerships in managing large regional landscapes such as the Tug Hill Region. He also recognized the Commission as a leader in the State in the depth and breadth of partnerships through local, county, regional (i.e. Councils of Governments) and state government. He also complimented the Commission on its grassroots, non-regulatory approach to protecting the region's environment and strengthening is economy.

State Senator Joe Griffo presented

the Commission with a joint resolution, sponsored by himself and Assembly Member Anthony Brindisi, of the New York State Legislature commemorating the Commission's 40th anniversary. He too

recognized the Commission on its unique way of working with local governments and the region's five Councils of Governments (COGs) in so effectively carrying out it's mission.

The Commission Members also recognized the Com-

mission's first Executive Director, Benjamin P. Coe, as the 33rd distinguished Tug Hill Sage. Mr. Coe was appointed by the first Tug Hill Commission Members as Executive Director in October 1973. He served in that position until his retirement in 1993. Ben was responsible for organizing and staffing the Commission, producing the Commission's founding reports "Resources of the Tug Hill Region" and "Preparing for the Future," which established the Commission's approach to cooperation with local governments. He also organized the first Cooperative Planning Boards, precursors to today's COGs, and led the Commission through the growth of Fort Drum.



Ben Coe receives Tug Hill Sage award from Commission Executive Director John K. Bartow, Jr.

Meet the Tug Hill Commission Staff

Commission staff provide support to Tug Hill councils of governments in community and economic development, land use planning, natural resource management, geographic information systems (GIS) and related fields.

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“Helping local governments and citizens shape the future of the Tug Hill region”

BLACK RIVER INITIATIVE

The Black River, flowing from its headwaters in the western Adirondacks, through the Tug Hill region and into Lake Ontario, is one of the area's most important natural resources. The Black River Initiative is a multi-pronged approach to protect and improve the water quality, recreational opportunities, and communities along the Black River. The Black River Trail Scenic Byway Corridor Management Plan (2012), Black River Watershed Management Plan (2008), Black River Blueway Trail Plan (2007) provide the foundation to advance existing efforts and new projects that enhance and improve all aspects of the Black River.

Scenic Byway Legislation Passed

On July 12, 2013 the Black River Trail and Maple Traditions Scenic Byway legislation was signed into law, which capped off a multiyear effort to reroute the Black

River Trail to follow the Black River, and to create a new Maple Traditions route from Lowville to Ogdensburg and Canton. These two routes are now part of the state's Scenic Byways system that includes more than 2,000 miles of roads in New York that have particular scenic, recreational, cultural, natural or archaeological significance. The program is intended to help preserve unusual environments and promote tourism. Communities along the scenic byway are eligible for federal funds for enhancements through NYS Department of Transportation.

Municipal Separate Storm- water Sewer Systems (MS4)

Population increases documented in the 2010 U.S. Census led to the designation of an urbanized area in Jefferson County in 2013. Several of the communities in the urbanized area are now being required to regulate municipal separate stormwater sewer systems (MS4) differently in their jurisdiction. The Commission has helped bring the communities together and

learn about what these new regulations mean. Efforts with this Stormwater Coalition will continue as the communities continue to move toward compliance with the new regulations.

Watershed Conference

An annual Black River Watershed Conference is held in early June to provide a venue for training and information sharing on a variety of topics pertinent to the Black River. In 2013 over 60 people attended the event at the Lowville Fire Hall, organized by the Tug Hill Commission, NYS DEC Region 6 and the Lewis County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD). Speakers covered a range of topics including invasive species, recreation, economic development, water quality and Black River Watershed projects.

Riverfest

The Lewis County Water Quality Coordinating Committee and SWCD annually work with Lewis County Chamber of Commerce to educate paddlers in the annual Riverfest

about the river and its watershed. In 2013, a total of 95 paddlers in 81 boats took part in the event on the Black River between Lyons Falls and Glenfield. Many local businesses and organizations sponsor trivia questions attached to swimming pool floaties and are placed along the river for paddlers to answer along the way. Participants answer questions on the trivia cards and are entered into a drawing to win a basket of local items.

Black River Trash Bash

The Black River Trash Bash is held annually in the fall. Sponsored in part by the American Littoral Society, and organized locally by the Commission and SWCD to clean up along the Black River, documents what litters its shores and increase awareness of this important natural treasure. In 2013, 29 participants from Lyons Falls Alive, the Adirondack Community Advisory League, Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust and the Lewis County Soil and Water Conservation District collected 726 pounds of trash from the Black River shoreline.

TUG HILL LOCAL
GOVERNMENT
FISCAL CHALLENGES
AND
OPPORTUNITIES

Local governments in the Tug Hill Region are coping with the fiscal challenges presented by the State’s continued effort to reduce residential and business real property taxes. Fortunately, many Tug Hill taxing units already exercise the fiscal oversight, frugality, and creative cross-jurisdictional service sharing that aligns with this initiative.

Real Property Tax Trends

Property tax is the most stable locally-controlled revenue source. Whereas sales tax and state aid are indeterminate revenue streams, property tax reliably pays for services such as schools, roads, and fire protection. This is due to the fact that property values remain relatively stable over time.

Property taxes also pay the local share of some federal/state programs such as Medicaid. They are used to

balance municipal budgets after all other revenue sources are exhausted. This is significant because property taxes can be dramatically impacted by decreases in other revenues such as sales tax and state aid or increases in required spending (i.e. mandates). As a result, municipalities typically find they need to increase property tax levies during economic downturns.

Property taxes in the counties that include the Tug Hill Region have increased steadily, although the data suggests that this rise is modest compared to that of New York State as a whole. The figures in Table 1 (below) and Chart 1 (page 6) are from the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS) where the dollar amount represents the median, or middle value, of property taxes paid by owner occupied housing units over three 5-year periods of time between 2006 and 2012. Increases in New York State median property taxes paid also outpaced those of the nation as a whole, which are more in line with those paid by Tug Hill residents.

Local Impact of Levy Cap Legislation

Enacted in 2011, New York State’s Real Property Tax Levy Cap legislation is meant to generate long-term tax relief through the sharing of municipal services; consolidating local governments; merging or dissolving governments; and demonstrating operational efficiencies. The law limits the amount that local governments and most school districts can increase annual property tax levies to the lesser of either two percent or the rate of inflation, with some exceptions.

Table 2 on page 6 shows taxing jurisdictions by type within the region that are impacted by the Cap. Towns and villages can override the cap through a two-thirds majority vote of their board members.

In 2013, 29% of Tug Hill towns (12 of 41) and 30% (6 of 20) of Tug Hill villages filed with the State Comptroller’s office to override the property tax levy cap, although this is based on local government budgets as submitted and is yet unverified. It is generally

Fiscal Challenges
Continued on Page 6

ABOUT
HEADWATERS

Headwaters is the annual newsletter report of the New York State Tug Hill Commission.

The Tug Hill Commission is a state funded, regional agency overseen by a board of nine unpaid commissioners - two each from Jefferson, Lewis, Oneida, and Oswego counties, and one at-large.

Commissioners are appointed for five year terms: three each by the Governor, State Senate and State Assembly. The Commission has an administrative link to New York State’s Department of State.

Chairman

Jan J. Bogdanowicz
Lewis County

Vice Chairman

Michael G. Yerdon, Sr.
Oswego County

Secretary

Thomas E. Boxberger
Jefferson County

Members

Leona M. Cheresnoski
Jefferson County

Roger W. Maciejko
Lewis County

Arnold E. Talgo
Oneida County

Kenneth W. Vigus
Oneida County

Table 1: Property Tax Data by County: <i>source American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates</i>			
Median Property Taxes	2006-2010	2007-2011	2008-2012
Jefferson County	\$1,961	\$2,082	\$2,151
Lewis County	\$1,717	\$1,758	\$1,760
Oneida County	\$2,354	\$2,412	\$2,462
Oswego County	\$2,504	\$2,584	\$2,670
New York State	\$3,389	\$3,984	\$4,173
United States	\$1,981	\$2,041	\$2,090

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RACOG PROGRESS

River Area Council of Governments (RACOG) members held four meetings in 2013 to conduct business and explore cost effective and efficient opportunities and options through shared service. Committed to "Creating a Community of Choice," local officials work with representatives from local, regional, state and federal agencies and organizations to implement infrastructure projects, affordable housing options and outdoor recreation facilities to improve residents' quality of life and support job development.

Building upon the success of Carthage and West Carthage to provide low-to-moderate income residents with affordable housing options using the Community Development Block Grant Program, the regional initiative has expanded into Champion and Wilna. Relatedly, Habitat for Humanity is working with Carthage to construct six single family affordable housing units on 3.75 acres in 2014.

As noted on page two of this newsletter, Carthage and West Carthage joined with the City of Watertown and the towns of LeRay, Rutland, Watertown and villages of Brownville, Black River and Dexter in 2013 to form the Jefferson County Stormwater Coalition to explore cost effective and efficient options and opportunities to comply with Municipal Separate Stormwater Sewer System (MS4) regulations.

The Joint Water Pollution Water Facility, managed by Carthage and West Carthage, will undergo upgrades to comply with new regulations and make operations more effi-

cient and effective. Champion and Wilna are working with the Development Authority of the North Country (DANC) to inventory and map water/sewer resources while Champion is working with the Commission to design an official town road map.

RACOG also administers, operates and maintains a six-week summer swim program at the Twin Village Outdoor Swim Facility during July and August. Partnering with the YMCA, certified swim instruction is available for local residents. Both villages also provide area residents/children with supervised summer & winter recreation programs during school breaks.

CTHC UPDATE

The Cooperative Tug Hill Council (CTHC) towns had a busy year. They continued to work on their special area protection program under the Tug Hill Reserve Act, with three more town maps being accepted at the annual fall meeting. Several other towns are either in the process, or have approved their maps. The hope is that all CTHC towns will have maps completed and approved in the future. The Council's towns are also involved in a low volume road mapping project with new maps being approved in nearly half of the towns, with mapping ongoing in several other towns.

The joint Zoning Board of Appeals continues to operate in the towns of Florence, Montague, Osceola, Pinckney and Turin, hearing several new cases in 2013. The Board has a new representative appointed from the Town of Osceola and looks forward to his service

for many years to come. Several of the towns have also undertaken a review of their local zoning laws leading to an updated law being passed in Florence.

In May 2013 the Council also faced the retirement of long-time Associate Circuit Rider Jeanne Wooding, who will be missed by all. In July, the Council hired a new Associate Circuit Rider, Beth Steria, who has been covering five towns since August.

SALMON RIVERS COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS CHANGES

As the result of a citizen-initiated petition in 2011, the village of Altmar ceased to exist as an incorporated entity on May 31, 2013. Since then, the town of Albion has assumed some of the village's past functions. The Altmar fire department has incorporated as an independent entity, and provides fire protection to the town under contract. It remains unclear what the cost savings associated with the dissolution will be in the long run. Part of the process included the formation of a lighting district using the former village boundary and the incorporation of the former village fire department. Altmar had no municipal water, sewer or other services that required the formation of additional improvement districts.

The three elementary schools in the Altmar-Parish-Williamstown school district have all been sold by the district. The former Altmar Elementary School has been renovated into a hotel and

fishing lodge, Tailwater Lodge, which can be found on the internet at www.tailwaterlodge.com.

The former Parish Elementary School has been purchased by Biospherix www.biospherix.com, a Lacona, New York-based biotechnology firm seeking facilities for expansion. Plans for Williamstown Elementary School have not been finalized.

GROWTH IN NOCCOG

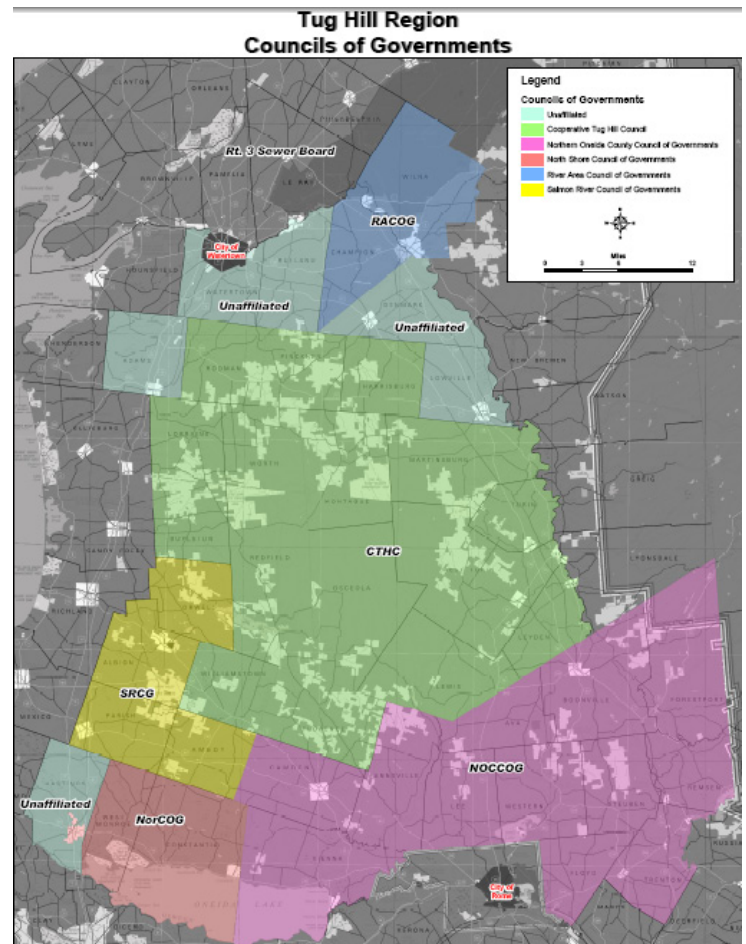
Over the last year Oneida County received encouraging economic development news that will have a major impact on not only Oneida County but the whole region. NYS announced earlier this year with the \$1.5 billion in public and private investment at SUNYIT's Computer Chip Commercialization Center (Quad C), 1,500 good paying jobs are expected in the next few years. Quad C is under construction and will open in the fall of 2014. The full build out potential could eventually be upwards of 5,000 jobs. Additionally, the state has approved the merger of SUNYIT and SUNY College of Nanoscale Science and Engineering. Oneida County is positioned to become a "nanotechnology hub" with the creation of Nano Utica Quad C and the Marcy Nanocenter chip fabrication site. The state has assumed the site's development and is hopeful that a total of \$45 billion will be invested over the next ten years.

The federal government announced at the end of 2013 that Griffiss International Airport in Rome will be a test site for commercial drones.

A group headquartered at Griffiss was awarded one of six licenses nationally for commercial drone testing.

NOCCOG towns have been preparing for this anticipated economic boom for the last few years. Almost all 19 town and villages have adopted or updated their comprehensive plans. Some are still a work in progress. Additionally many are reviewing or have recently updated their land use plan and zoning laws. Controlling growth while protecting natural resources, small town values and regional culture has been identified as being of utmost importance for NOCCOG communities. Development is certainly welcomed in northern Oneida County but residents also want to preserve what makes the area unique. The Tug Hill Commission and NOCCOG have played a vital role in working with these municipalities in preparing for this growth and development.

Many communities are also assessing additional needs to make their town or village even more desirable places to live. This includes improvements to existing infrastructure (water, wastewater and storm sewers), revitalization to downtown areas, park and waterfront improvements and trail development. A diverse inventory of housing will be in demand, ranging from what is currently available to new developments. Communities are looking for ways to spruce up and present themselves as a great place to live and raise a family. NOCCOG towns and villages are addressing



and preparing how they will fit into this long awaited economic boom in the area.

NORTH SHORE COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS UPDATE

Hastings is the site for a proposed racetrack, Central New York Raceway Park. The project is currently undergoing environmental review, and has been the recipient of NYS economic development funds. Raceway plans include a half-mile synthetic dirt oval and a 2.2 mile road course. Project documents can be found at the town's web site, www.hastingsny.org.

Construction of the West Monroe and Constantia joint water district has been completed. Constantia is assessing the feasibility of water system

extension east to Bernhards Bay and the boundary with the village of Cleveland.

West Monroe is exploring options for wastewater treatment as their Big Bay treatment plant nears the end of its working life. Constantia is also evaluating wastewater treatment options, which may include intermunicipal service provision with West Monroe and/or the village of Cleveland.

The Central Square Central School District is studying district demographic trends and its existing infrastructure in order to improve service delivery and control costs. Possible options include closing one or more of the district's schools. The study documents can be found on the internet at www.cssd.org/community.cfm?subpage=50822.

Fiscal Challenges Continued from Page 3

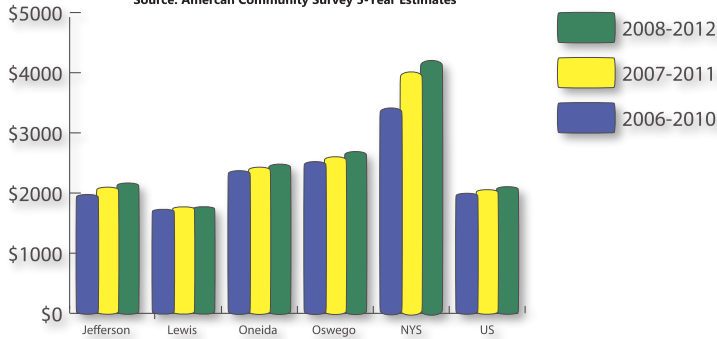
understood that many towns and villages approved the override, but ultimately were able to keep their budgets

Collaboration & Shared Services

Local governments in the Tug Hill region have a long history of formal and informal collaboration, such as the sharing of municipal offices,

CHART 1

MEDIAN PROPERTY TAXES PAID
Source: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates



within the prescribed tax levy increase limit.

Tug Hill property owners pay less property tax when compared to property owners in the rest of the state, in part reflecting lower land values in our rural region. Most Tug Hill municipalities have maintained lean budgets for many, many years. Small changes to unavoidable costs and limitations in the ability to levy the necessary property taxes can have significant impact in rural communities.

It is expected that additional incentives to reduce the property tax levy will go into affect for municipalities in the future.

facilities and equipment. Shared services also include joining with school districts to purchase group employee benefits, fuel, sand supplies and coordinating emergency management, police protection and highway maintenance. Many municipalities share town justices and three Tug Hill towns share a court. Codes officers and assessors often serve more than one community.

Assistance Available to Local Governments

The Department of State's Local Government Efficiency Program provides technical assistance and competitive grants to local govern-

ments for the development of projects that will achieve savings and improve municipal efficiency through shared services, cooperative agreements, mergers, consolidations and dissolutions.

Many Tug Hill communities have used this program and its previous iterations over the years, including the Village of Altmar and Town of Albion to first study, and then implement, dissolution. The

CONSERVATION PARTNER OF THE YEAR

Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust (THTLT) recognized Tug Hill Commission Executive Director John Bartow as the land trust's Conservation Partner of the Year at its 2013 annual meeting held at Tug Hill Vineyards. The Commission and THTLT have partnered for years, including the land



The Army Compatible Use Buffer program protects farms near Fort Drum.

villages of Prospect, Remsen and Barneveld studied and have shared water operation and maintenance. The villages of Carthage and West Carthage have studied the viability of combining police forces. The Town and Village of Adams funded part of their joint municipal offices through the LGE program.

trust's formation and founding years in the early 1990's. More recently, the Commission has worked with THTLT on augmenting federal funding for the Army Compatible Use Buffer (ACUB) program. 2013 was the first year of State matching funds dedicated to the purchase of conservation easements on agricultural land near Fort Drum, which

TABLE 2: Local Government in the Tug Hill Region by County

Municipal Corporations					Special Purpose Units of Local Government (Improvement Districts)						
Counties	Villages	Towns	School Districts	Fire Districts	Fire Protection	Garbage	Street Lighting	Water	Sewer	Ambulance	Environmental
Jefferson	4	7	6	6	4	1	8	17	10	0	0
Lewis	7	11	4	1	17	0	3	10	7	0	0
Oneida	6	13	8	6	15	1	14	16	6	0	1
Oswego	3	10	6	2	11	1	8	7	5	1	0
Totals	20	41	24	15	47	3	33	50	28	0	0

prevents encroachment and protects the ability of the base to train its troops.

While 2013 marks the Conservation Partner award, Mr. Bartow’s acceptance recognized over 20 years of partnership with THTLT in protecting the rural Tug Hill landscape and countless hours of staff commitment to the partnership. Together, the Commission and land trust form an exemplary public/private partnership for landscape conservation with Tug Hill landowners.

2013 LOCAL LEADERS SURVEY

As required in the Tug Hill Commission’s enabling statute, once every 5 years the Commission surveys local

leaders in the region. The survey asks several questions regarding Commission programs and services and whether or not the Commission should continue its mission. For the seventh time, the Commission completed the local leader’s survey in 2013.

The survey was mailed to local representatives across Tug Hill with a 41% return rate. A total of 98% of the respondents believed it was extremely important (77%) or somewhat important (21%) for the Tug Hill Commission to continue its mission. These results are among the highest level of support in all local leaders’ surveys conducted by the Commission.

In terms of the importance

of programs and services, the top three responses rated “essential” or “important” were all tied at 97% and include: helping communities protect the environment; workshops to increase local officials’ skills, including the annual LGC; and, land use planning assistance to towns and villages. On the lower end, but still highly valued at approximately 80% rated as “essential” or “important” were: technical assistance to forest landowners and forest businesses; helping towns and villages solve day-to-day legal, accounting, computer and similar problems; and, technical assistance to farmers and farm businesses.

In terms of rating the Commissions “Effectiveness”, the highest ratings went

to: workshops to increase local official skills including the annual LGC (92%);land use planning assistance to towns and villages (87%), and helping communities protect the environment (80%). Surprisingly on the lower scale was helping recreational trail development (skiing, ATVs, snowmobile, scenic highways, etc.).

Overall the respondents gave extremely high ratings (all over 90%) to the Commission staff characteristics for cooperation, expertise, understanding area needs and promptness. Full results of the survey are available on the Commission’s website, www.tughill.org.

While the survey results are both flattering and hum-

**Local Leaders Survey
Continued on Page 8**

COMMISSION PROGRAMS AND FUNDING

The Tug Hill Commission’s budget for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2013, was about \$1.0 million. Most of this funding came from the Commission’s annual state appropriation. A small amount came from grants and revenues, such as registration for our Local Government Conference. Commission funding has remained unchanged and level with the previous year’s funding for three years in a row.

Commission expenses equal its funding, with 91% of Commission expenditures going to staff salaries. The balance covers operational costs such as postage, office equipment, car expenses, etc. The Commission employed

14 staff, including four full-time circuit riders for Tug Hill councils of governments (COGs) during this period. The COGs use revenues from member communities to help fund part-time circuit riders and other costs.

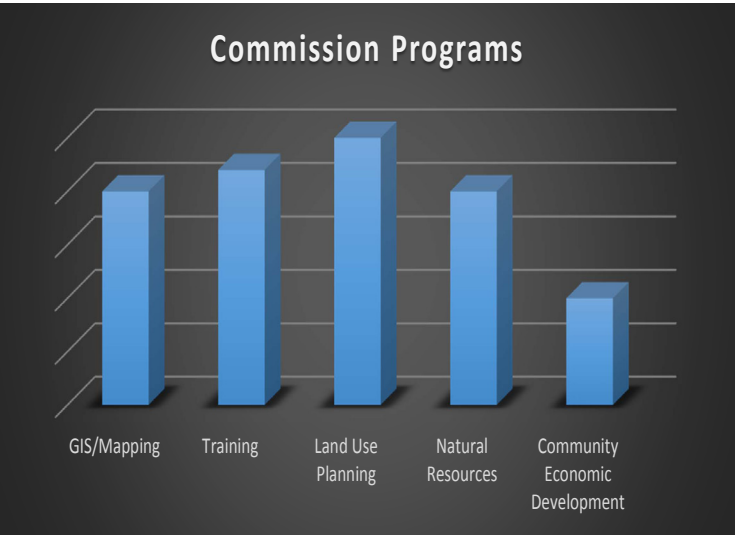
One way to gauge the value of the Commission’s budget is to look at what it brings back to the region. Historically, the Commission helps secure more money for Tug Hill local governments every year than the Commission’s annual appropriation. Another way to gauge value is by what gets done in Tug Hill communities.

Annually, the Commission works with approximately 20 local communities on revisions to land use codes and comprehensive plans and various other projects from watershed protection to Main Street revitalization and business development.

The Commission anticipates a growing demand for assistance in land use planning and natural resource protection as communities work to manage growth and development around the region.

As we continue to deal with these challenging fiscal times, staff will look for ways

to deliver fiscal savings while sustaining vital services. The Commission will also work with communities in savings of their own through efficiencies and sharing of services when interested.





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Local Leaders Survey Continued from Page 7

bling, perhaps even better is that the commission's means of helping local communities protect the region's natural resources while growing the rural economy still works and is well received. Thanks to all the respondents and the Commission looks forward to continued service to Tug Hill communities.

COMMISSION CONTINUES TO PROVIDE TRAINING

An important part of the Commission program has been and continues to be training local officials. The centerpiece of training is the all-day Local Government Conference held in Watertown annually since 1989, currently hosting thirty training sessions. This conference primarily provides training to town and village boards, planning boards, zoning boards of appeals, clerks, assessors, and highway superintendents. Planning Officials can often meet their mandated annual training requirements through sessions at this conference. The conference was attended by about 630 people in 2013, one of the largest such conferences in

the state.

The Commission recognizes that most officials cannot attend all-day training events, and often find it difficult to travel outside the region. So the Commission has made a concerted effort to bring training to local officials on the hill in evening workshops to fill this gap. Locally held sessions typically address topics for planning and zoning officials such as comprehensive planning, planning board basics, State Environmental Quality Review (SEQR), and zoning board of appeals basics. These are held on an individual town or multi-town basis depending on the requests and needs of local officials.

Other topics are addressed based on request, and are often related to general governance. Recent ses-

sions included training for newly elected officials, budgeting, workman's compensation, and animal controls.

The Commission also hosts conferences and training for particular environmental issues affecting the region. The all-day Black River Watershed Conference, annually attended by 60-70 people, provides a forum to address the future of this important watershed.

The Commission is dedicated to bringing timely and appropriate training opportunities to our local officials in a flexible way that makes attendance as easy and practical as possible. Requests for topics should be made to your local circuit rider or addressed to the commission staff in Watertown.

