

New York State Tug Hill Commission

2020-2024 Strategic Plan



Adopted at the October 21, 2019 Tug Hill Commission board meeting.



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

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Introduction

Since the beginning in 1973, the Tug Hill Commission has embraced the balancing act of providing necessary assistance to Tug Hill local governments and organizations to help them achieve their goals, and addressing regional issues that transcend individual communities and show the value of the commission to the state. The unique flexibility of the commission has allowed for a successful, evolving experiment on how to run a “state agency” that does not really seem like a state agency, and that stays true to its grassroots foundation in light of shifting priorities at all levels of government.

The development of the 2020–2024 strategic plan has included analysis and information gathered from several sources, including:

- Review of past strategic plans, evaluation of effectiveness and brainstorming by commission board and staff
- 2018 Local Leaders Survey
- 2019 Tug Hill Residents and Landowners Survey, and comparison to 2009 survey
- Outreach at the 2019 Tug Hill Local Government Conference
- 2019 online survey to local officials specifically on strategic plan
- Consultation with the region’s five councils of governments

Reaffirm Mission and Approach

As the saying goes, “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” The commission’s grassroots, non-regulatory model of building local capacity through technical assistance continues to be well-received by local communities and organizations, and used as a model by others in New York State and beyond. The commission’s mission of “helping local governments and citizens shape the future of the Tug Hill region” continues to encapsulate the agency’s mode of operation. Working with the region’s councils of governments through a system of circuit riders is one of the primary ways we achieve our mission. Maintaining close working relationships and partnering with local, county and regional entities and state agencies is another of the commission’s strengths in achieving results.

Reaffirm Core Competencies

The commission’s staff is our primary asset, made possible with funding from the New York State Legislature and Governor. Making them capable and successful is key, and deploying them on the correct topics is critical.

Land use planning was the commission’s first charge and remains its core value. Demand for land use planning services remains steady and should serve as the cornerstone for Tug Hill towns and villages as they look to position their communities for the future. In recent years, forces driving land use change in the region have been primarily second home development, second home conversion to year-round

usage, and renewable energy development. Commission planning staff has responded to requests from towns and villages to deal with those changes, and anticipates the trend will continue over the next five years.

The Tug Hill Commission was formed because of the natural resources that define Tug Hill – forests, wetlands, streams, soils, climate – and natural resources conservation and development continue to heavily influence the work of the commission. Tug Hill is the third largest forested area in the state, and its natural resources value is of state and national significance. Involvement in natural resources projects at all scales is key to maintaining and improving the value of Tug Hill to New York State.

The commission's enabling legislation charges the agency to strengthen the "long-term economy, employment, cultural and social resources" of the region. The commission's community development expertise is used to assist local governments and organizations through strategic planning, local capacity building, shared services, and grant writing. Another emerging trend may be accommodating a growing senior population, which could include housing, services, transportation and recreation.

Overall, our towns and villages have evolved significantly since the early days of the commission, and technology has changed as well. Much of the baseline work has been done in Tug Hill towns and villages, and now staff must help those communities keep things updated and address new issues as they arise. Our communities have also significantly increased their capacity, so they need commission staff assistance in more complicated issues rather than basics in most cases. Lastly, the availability of information in the digital age has greatly increased, so both communities and staff can research and respond to questions much more rapidly than in earlier decades.

COG Growth & Keeping "Boots on the Ground"

Over the past three years both the Cooperative Tug Hill Council (CTHC) and River Area Council of Governments (RACOG) have welcomed new communities into their councils of governments (COGs). Municipal meeting coverage is done by full-time circuit riders who are staff of the Tug Hill Commission, and augmented by contract circuit riders in two COGs, funded through COG dues. Two other COGs are considering the addition of contract circuit riders. Multiple meetings on the same night and geographic barriers prevent full-time circuit riders from attending all monthly municipal meetings.

While contractors serve an important function in attending and reporting on meetings, they are limited in their ability to handle technical assistance requests in the field and follow-up more comprehensively on complicated issues and projects. Communities that are generally served by contract circuit riders may not be receiving the same level of service as communities who usually see a full-time circuit rider at their monthly meetings.

To better serve COG communities most in need of commission and COG support, the level of community need and activity will be assessed on a regular basis at commission staff meetings, and meeting coverage adjusted as necessary. In some cases, this may mean the full-time circuit rider attend

a certain community's monthly meetings every month for a certain length of time and using contract circuit riders for other communities' meetings. In other cases, it may mean assigning a staffer based out of Watertown to attend a certain community's meetings for a period of time.

The "Economic Development" Question

The definition of economic development is the process by which the economic well-being and quality of life of a defined area is improved. As noted earlier, the commission is charged with improving the economic well-being of the region. Both business retention and growth, as well as improvements in quality of life, usually requires access to basic infrastructure. Based on the surveys conducted by the commission both of local officials and the region's residents and landowners, improvements in cell and broadband coverage, as well as water and wastewater infrastructure, are required by many to encourage economic development.

Traditional land-based economic activities, particularly recreation, forestry, and agriculture, play a large role in shaping how the region's landowners generate income and what Tug Hill's towns look like. In the region's hamlets and villages, retail and mixed uses in the main street/downtown area are a priority.

The commission will use its strengths in collaborating with partner counties and other relevant organizations to put more focus on economic development in the region. Staff will also look for best practices in other rural areas of New York State and the country, to bring successful ideas to the region.

More Regional Analysis

The Tug Hill Commission is also charged in its enabling legislation to "prepare, publish and disseminate information or reports to highlight for state agencies, local governments and the general public issues, problems, and opportunities relevant to the Tug Hill region, in concert with state and federal agencies and others." The commission does this best with its series of technical and issue papers, that range from how-to manuals on a variety of land use topics, to analyses and recommendations on regional issues like minimum maintenance roads and property taxes.

Over the next five years, the commission will pursue regional analyses related to renewable energy and cell phone and broadband infrastructure, and potentially other topics. Analysis will be completed using a combination of staff, interns, public officials and outside consultants, when funding can be secured to support those contracts. The commission will also spearhead a "State of the Tug Hill Region" report once Census 2020 data becomes available.

Training and Skill Development

Providing tools and information to both local officials and staff to help them do their jobs better and smarter is critical for success. The annual Tug Hill Local Government Conference (LGC) is and will continue to be the commission's flagship training event for local officials. To encourage youth interest in local government, the

commission will offer two free registrations to every school district in the region in 2020, one for a high school senior and one for a teacher to accompany them as a trial. If successful, this practice will continue for future LGCs.

Workshops held around the region are also popular and help make training more accessible to local officials who work full-time day jobs. On average, the commission organizes eighteen stand-alone workshops in any given year on a variety of topics. We will continue to deliver training in this way, and continue to use technology to deliver training in new ways, including webinars and video recordings of trainings made available on the commission's YouTube channel.

Based on input from surveys, commission staff will broaden workshop/conference topics to include more infrastructure and economic development issues. This is beginning in 2019 with a workshop about water and wastewater infrastructure.

Regular commission staff training is necessary to keep on top of emerging items in each of the core competencies. Each staff person is encouraged to attend at least one conference annually, as funds allow, and to participate in online training through webinars, TED talks, etc. As a trial in 2020, staff will take turns organizing a "lunch and learn" session approximately once a month to expand professional development opportunities.

All new commission staff will attend training workshops on basic local government topics, to give them a strong background in municipal functions. Maintaining an up-to-date Geographic Information System (GIS) for the commission is critical to supporting the commission program. As new staff are hired, GIS capabilities will be given high priority as a skillset.

"Marketing" Tug Hill

Another key function of the Tug Hill Commission is to communicate the identity of the region and the commission to the general public and all levels of government. Publication of *Tug Hill, Shaping the Future of the Region* was a great accomplishment in 2018. Later this year a completely revamped edition of the Tug Hill Recreation Guide, in partnership with Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust and the four-county tourism and promotion agencies, will be released and be an excellent resource for defining the region and what it has to offer for recreation.

In 2020, the commission will update its regional map brochure and local government services brochure, as key publications to explain the region and the services of the commission.

For a few years in the 2000s the commission offered a Tug Hill Local Leaders' Institute to develop new regional leaders. Over the next year or two, the commission will consider reviving something similar, thinking critically about how to differentiate it from county-level local leaders' institutes and what the end goals would be. One potential benefit would be supporting leadership succession across the region as long-time public officials retire.

The commission holds an annual meeting to network with leaders across Tug Hill and beyond, and to share what the commission has accomplished and what is planned for the upcoming year, and often includes a presentation of regional significance. Occasionally, the commission designates new Tug Hill

Sages at the annual dinner. Starting at the 2020 annual meeting, the commission will start a new recognition program geared to honor a Tug Hill community based on a set of criteria to be developed.

Importance of Partnerships & Leveraging Outside Sources of Funding

Almost all the commission's budget revenue comes from its state appropriation, which until state budget year 2019–20 had been flat for six years. The slight increase in 2019–20 was much appreciated, and allowed for the first true new hire on the retirement of the commission's long-time planning director in 2019. While further increases in appropriation to allow the filling of three vacant positions would be very welcomed, in reality it seems unlikely to happen in the near future.

In the past several years the commission has been successful in leveraging partnerships and outside funding to secure interns. This has allowed for field work and special projects to be completed that otherwise would have not happened. The commission will operationalize its internship program to secure 1–2 interns per year.

The commission enabling legislation details its power and duty to “apply for and receive from the federal and state government and public and private agencies, funds to accomplish the purposes of the commission and to solicit, receive and utilize gifts and donations of any kind from any source.” This potential avenue of outside funding has been limited administratively by a low budget appropriation in its “special revenue other” fund. While this appropriation was increased slightly a few years ago, to adequately meet the costs of adding temporary staff, interns, or hiring consultants for large regional projects, it needs to be increased from its current \$50,000 to \$200,000, with reappropriations as necessary. This is not intended to supplant general fund appropriation.

The New York State Department of State (DOS) is a key state agency partner. The commission's budget falls underneath DOS's budget unit, and staff enjoys a close working relationship to meet constantly changing requirements for financial matters. Commission staff also regularly collaborate with DOS's Division of Local Government Services and Division of Planning, Infrastructure, and Community Development on training and program initiatives. Maintaining and strengthening this partnership is critical to the continued delivery of the Tug Hill Commission program.

Additionally, commission staff work almost daily with staff from the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, Office of the State Comptroller, the New York State GIS Program Office, and other state agency partners to respond to requests and further projects of benefit to Tug Hill communities and New York State. Continued collaboration with all these state agency partners, as well as local organizations such as Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust and county planning departments, is important to the success of the commission in the future.