

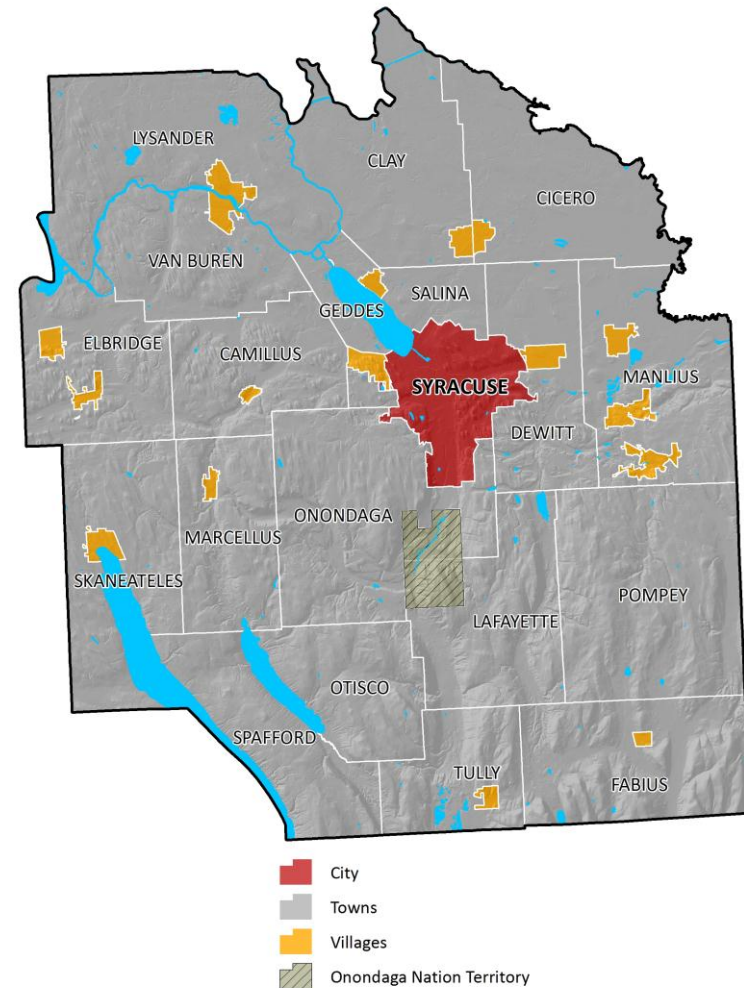


ELEMENTS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: Intermunicipal Planning

The *Intermunicipal Planning* element examines the current extent of intermunicipal planning within Onondaga County and provides ways in which these collaborative efforts can be improved.

Introduction

Onondaga County is home to more than 450,000 people living in a variety of settings – from historic tree-lined urban neighborhoods to old farmhouses set among rolling fields. The post-World War II population shift redistributed the population away from Syracuse and into suburban environments and land use patterns driven by the presence of infrastructure and accessibility to major roadways. Once largely independent of each other and of the larger region, the County's 35 communities currently share significant resources, including road, water and sanitary sewer infrastructure. Additionally, the County as a whole is heavily dependent upon the economic engine of Syracuse, further connecting communities. While intermunicipal boundaries are indistinguishable in the landscape, the economic, resource and community character connections between communities are a significant factor in the success of the *Sustainable Development Plan*.





Many of the changes in land use patterns can be attributed to the variety of governments, authorities and districts that comprise Onondaga County, all of which have varying land use and taxing authority. Onondaga County is comprised of 19 towns, 15 villages, one center city and the Onondaga Nation, a tribal territory under separate governance. New York State is governed by Home Rule, meaning that the State vests the authority to regulate land use and shape community planning and development with local municipalities. This land use authority is typically exercised through zoning ordinances and subdivision regulations. There are also numerous special purpose districts established in each community that have a significant impact on local property taxes, including sewer, water, fire, drainage, lighting and schools. The establishment, regulation and management of each of these districts are largely accomplished at the local level, with the exception of school districts, which generally function autonomously from municipal government.

While local communities are the ultimate determinant as to the type and pattern of development allowed within their borders, economic, environmental and social issues, however, do not adhere to municipal boundaries. Not only do many issues facing the region cross jurisdictions, they are also multi-disciplinary. Any efforts designed to improve the economic, environmental and social health of Onondaga County will require coordination, collaboration, and partnerships among the County, its 35 municipalities, and the citizens and businesses located within the County.

Regional Planning

Planning allows communities to coordinate individual decisions to ensure that new development supports the goals of the community as a whole. Planning also provides an opportunity to examine a community's existing conditions so that a better understanding of the trends affecting that community can be gained. When change occurs in communities that don't plan, or when a community's plans are not complete or adhered to by municipal officials, change often occurs haphazardly.

Planning at the regional and intermunicipal scale is necessary to ensure the efficient use and deployment of limited regional resources, including land, utility capacity, transportation infrastructure, human capital and sources of County, State and Federal funding. Onondaga County is one region, with its destiny and future prosperity intertwined among the economic, environmental and social impacts resulting from land development patterns that are largely blind to municipal boundaries.

Local municipalities have the ability to make some land use and infrastructure decisions which are disconnected from the shared needs and goals of the region. If Onondaga County is to continue to thrive, it must face challenges as a region by walking the fine line between serving the needs of the individual communities and the region, protecting the environment, ensuring social equity in the decision-making process and taking into account the rights of individual land owners and community members.



In addition to the 35 municipalities charged with local planning and decisions, there are four primary organizations involved in for regional land use and transportation related planning in Onondaga County:

- The Syracuse-Onondaga County Planning Agency
- The Central New York Regional Planning and Development Board;
- The Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council; and
- CenterState Corporation for Economic Opportunity.

County Planning

The primary planning organization at the County level is the Syracuse-Onondaga County Planning Agency (SOCPA). SOCPA's mission is to provide and promote effective planning by the County and its City, towns and villages. To achieve this mission, the SOCPA offers a wide variety of services, including:

- Countywide land use and comprehensive planning.
- Intermunicipal coordination of development through the Onondaga County Planning Board (i.e., General Municipal Law Section 239 Review).
- Onondaga County Planning Federation (OCPF).
- Farmland Protection planning, including administering the Agricultural Districts and Purchase of Development Rights programs.

- Collection, analysis and distribution of land use data.
- Geographic Information Systems (GIS) services.
- Technical and planning assistance to County and City departments and to the towns and villages.

Under New York State General Municipal Law (GML) Section 239-l, m and n, municipal boards are required to refer certain actions to the County Planning Board for review. The Onondaga County Planning Board (OCPB) is staffed by the Syracuse-Onondaga County Planning Agency. Most local planning and zoning actions, such as the development of comprehensive plans and local laws and the approval of site plans, subdivisions, special permits and variances, are referable to the OCPB if they are located within 500 feet of a County/State road, municipal boundary, County/State park or recreation area, County stream or drainage channel, County/State owned land on which a public building or institution is situated or the boundary of a farm operation located in an agricultural district.

The OCPB review considers the Countywide and intermunicipal impacts of proposed actions. Based on GML Section 239-l, this review may include consideration of the following issues:

- Compatibility of various land uses with one another;
- Traffic generating characteristics of various land uses in relation to the effect of such traffic on other land uses and to the adequacy of existing and proposed thoroughfare facilities;



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Intermunicipal Planning



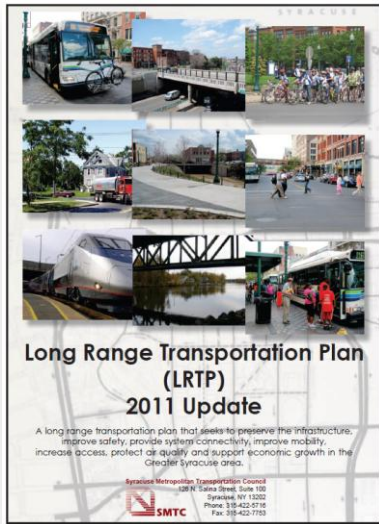
- Impact of proposed land uses on existing and proposed County or State institutional or other uses;
- Protection of community character as it regards predominant land uses, population density, and the relation between residential and nonresidential areas;
- Drainage;
- Community facilities;
- Official municipal and County development policies, as may be expressed through comprehensive plans, capital programs or regulatory measures; and
- Any other matters as they may relate to the public convenience, governmental efficiency and to the achieving and maintaining of a satisfactory community environment.

Central New York Regional Planning and Development Board

The Central New York Regional Planning and Development Board (CNYRPDB) is a public agency that was established in 1966 by Cayuga, Cortland, Madison, Onondaga and Oswego Counties. CNYRPDB provides a comprehensive range of services associated with the growth and development of communities in Central New York. Areas of focus for CNYRPDB have historically included watershed planning, economic development and local municipal planning assistance. The RPDB has recently also taken an emerging role in regional alternative energy, efficiency and climate change planning as NYSERDA's regional Energy Smart Communities Coordinator.

Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council

The Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC) is the State-designated Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for the region. Although originally confined to Onondaga County, the SMTC's planning region has expanded into small portions of Oswego and Madison counties. SMTC is made up of an extensive list of federal, state, regional, county, and city representatives, including transportation officials, planners, economic development agencies and elected officials.



One of the primary functions of the SMTC is maintaining a long range transportation plan (L RTP) that identifies future transportation needs for the region. The SMTC also maintains the region's Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), which includes a multi-year allocation of federal funding for capital investments in areas such as transit, major roads,

bridges and highways and bicycle and pedestrian routes. As it relates to sustainability, the SMTC has recognized the link between transportation and land use and acts as an advocate for integrating the two at the planning and policy level. The SMTC also conducts an annual program of planning studies (the Unified Planning Work Program) based on proposals submitted by member agencies and municipalities. These studies provide the basis for the funding of future transportation projects within the region.

CenterState Corporation for Economic Opportunity

Based out of Syracuse, the CenterState Corporation for Economic Opportunity (CenterState CEO) is a twelve-county business leadership and economic development organization that has recently focused on a regional approach to economic development through partnerships and planning. CenterState CEO houses the regional chamber of commerce and provides programs on Business Expansion, Retention and Attraction, Innovation and Entrepreneurship, Infrastructure and Urban Initiatives, Workforce and Talent Initiatives, Government Relations and Business Advocacy and Tourism and Regional Marketing.

CenterState CEO has taken the lead on several regionally significant planning and revitalization initiatives in recent years, with a focus on policy reform, including historic preservation tax credits, the enabling of land banks for urban revitalization, business retention and attraction in the urban core and infrastructure stabilization and capitalization through strategic growth initiatives.



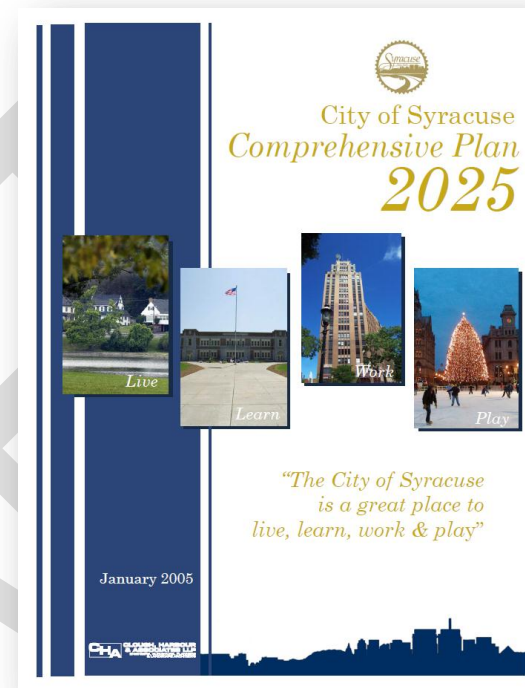
Community-Based Planning

Onondaga County is in a unique position in that it is home to a wealth of organizations and institutions whose mission is to improve the quality of life for the region and play an active role in County planning initiatives. In addition to the regional planning bodies previously noted, these institutions and organizations include (but are by no means limited to) the various local colleges and universities, Focus Greater Syracuse, Syracuse 20/20, the Central New York Community Foundation and the Onondaga Citizens League. There are also several notable organizations and programs in the County that provide opportunities to learn about the inner-workings of government and break down perceived barriers to participation, which is critical to good planning. Programs such as the Citizens Academy and Leadership Greater Syracuse should be supported.

Local Municipal Planning

As indicated earlier, New York State is governed by Home Rule, meaning that control of land use regulation takes place at the local municipal level. At the municipal level, typical mechanisms for guiding land use and development are comprehensive plans and zoning ordinances. In most municipalities, however, there is no professional planning staff to offer expertise and guidance to decision makers.

Comprehensive plans are based on community goals and aspirations and provide guidance on transportation, infrastructure, land use,



recreation and housing policies. In Onondaga County, comprehensive plans vary by municipality with differing levels of detail and complexity. Maintenance of updated and adopted planning documents is a challenge to many municipalities, with a number of municipalities lacking a comprehensive plan altogether.

Zoning ordinances (including site plan and special use permit review) and subdivision regulations are the regulatory tools most often employed by communities to exercise control over land development patterns. All municipalities in Onondaga County,



except the Town of Otisco, have zoning ordinances. As with comprehensive plans, the complexity, detail and integration of emerging concepts and plans vary greatly across municipalities, and revisions are costly, time consuming, complex and sometimes contentious.

Most municipalities in Onondaga County have three boards that make decisions regarding land use. The responsibilities and level of planning involvement of different boards vary somewhat depending on each community. The Town or Village Board is the legislative board comprised of elected officials. The Town Board generally is responsible for adopting/amending local laws, zoning/subdivision ordinances, comprehensive plans and official maps.

Planning Boards are referral and advisory bodies that make recommendations regarding the planning and development of the municipality. Some of the typical powers granted to Planning Boards include advising the Town/Village Board on development of a zoning ordinance or comprehensive plan, site plan and subdivision review decisions and special permit review authority. The Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) interprets the zoning ordinance and considers and decides appeals of decisions relating to zoning matters such as area and use variances.

Planning Board and ZBA members are generally community members appointed by the legislative board or the Supervisor/Mayor. Members, who usually do not have prior formal

training or education in the planning field specifically, are now required by State Law to obtain four hours of training each year.

School Districts

Onondaga County's 35 municipalities have a fragmented school system, with 18 school districts primarily within the County and 9 additional districts with small portions located in the County. A lack of population growth or population decrease in some municipalities, combined with rising costs, has made it difficult for many small school districts to survive as the communities they serve cannot generate adequate revenue to support the district. It may benefit some of these communities to explore consolidation of districts, facilities or sharing some district services (e.g., administration) to help create the economies of scale necessary to provide affordable education services. In addition, school taxes are often the largest component of local property taxes for residents, yet school districts have no regulatory authority over land use decisions and are often not included in the planning process. Inclusion of school districts in local and regional planning decision making could provide added context for local and regional land use and development and provide positive long-term impacts to the fiscal viability of the school district.

Onondaga County Planning Federation

The Onondaga County Planning Federation is a nonprofit corporation that promotes community and inter-community planning in the County's municipalities. The Federation serves



every municipality in Onondaga County by hosting annual training conferences for elected and appointed local officials and the public. The Syracuse-Onondaga County Planning Agency provides staff services to the Federation.

The Federation's Annual Planning Symposium provides local and affordable training that Planning Board and ZBA members can use to fulfill newly enacted requirements by NYS for 4 hours of training annually. The Symposium also allows representatives of different communities in the region to discuss common opportunities and challenges, and receive education and training on planning board and related topics. Expanding the Federation's educational outreach would provide more opportunities to strengthen local planning and intermunicipal coordination.

New York State Environmental Quality Review Act

The New York State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQR) requires all State and local government agencies to consider environmental impacts when making decisions to approve, fund or directly undertake actions or projects. SEQR requires that potential environmental impacts be balanced with economic and social factors during decision making.

The SEQR process is an important component of municipal planning. This process can be complex, but when completed correctly it can help to minimize adverse environmental impacts related to a project or land use decision. SEQR also promotes project

The SEQR Cookbook

A Step-by-Step Discussion of the Basic SEQR Process



State Environmental Quality Review Act
New York State Department of Environmental Conservation
Division of Environmental Permits

Revised 2004



coordination among involved and interested agencies and the public. The SEQR process offers the opportunity to include planning into decision making by identifying and analyzing a set of rational alternatives to solve a development objective. A new SEQR process for planning projects is currently under development by the NYS DEC.

Other Planning Issues

Resources, Cooperation & Competition

Due to limited resources, many municipalities lack planning staff and are constrained in their ability to fund planning initiatives such as updating comprehensive plans or zoning ordinances. This can

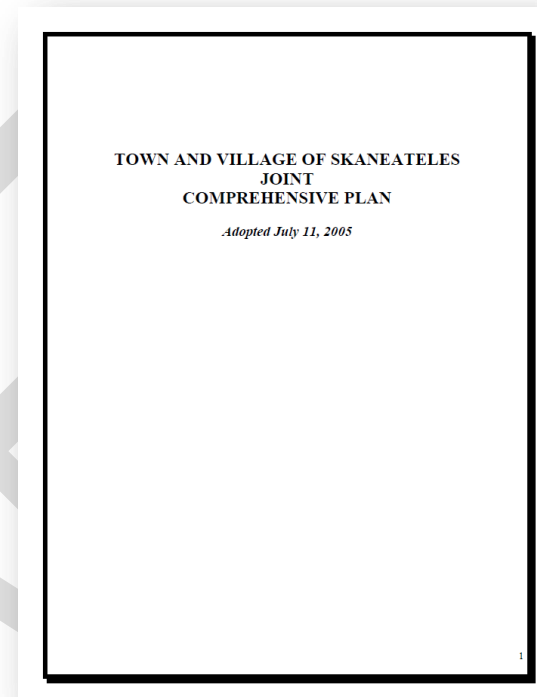


result in the approval of developments that may not provide consistency with the community's shared vision and/or limited adherence to existing planning efforts. Further, limited staff resources can also lead to development that fails to take advantage of the communities' assets, and incurs long-term costs that the community cannot afford. When budgets are constricted, planning often does not appear to be a vital service. However, good planning can save municipalities millions of dollars in long-term costs.

Few of the 34 towns and villages in Onondaga County have professionally trained planning staff or directors to help guide planning in the municipality and provide assistance to the Planning Board and ZBA. The City of Syracuse has planning resources; however these are spread across a wide variety of complex projects and initiatives. The Syracuse-Onondaga County Planning Agency has limited staffing capacity to provide assistance to local municipalities, a service that in prior decades served to minimize planning costs to municipalities to conduct vital planning initiatives.

Intermunicipal Coordination

Economic, environmental and social issues do not end at municipal boundaries. However, municipalities vary widely in their interaction with and consideration of neighboring communities and regional goals and needs when developing comprehensive plans or approving development projects. At a minimum, State law (GML § 239-nn) requires that a municipality give 10 days' notice to an adjacent municipality when a hearing is held relating to a subdivision, site plan, special use permit or use variance



applications on properties that are within 500 feet of an adjacent municipality.

Some communities in New York State have created intermunicipal planning boards and dispute resolution agreements to help resolve cross-border impacts resulting from new development. In Onondaga County, for example, the Town and Village of Tully recently merged their Planning Boards into a single Joint Planning Board. Communities have also developed multi-municipal plans to address issues associated with cross-jurisdictional projects. An



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example of such cooperation and collaboration is the joint Town-Village Comprehensive Plan developed by the Town and Village of Skaneateles. For complex projects or those involving a number of municipalities or stakeholders, the Onondaga County Planning Board occasionally conducts Coordinated Review sessions, which act to bring together municipal decision makers, authorizing agencies, planners and other stakeholders to consider the variety of complexities that a project might present during the planning process. The goal of these sessions is to increase communication and coordination in a comprehensive perspective among the many players in planning and development.

Municipal cooperation with regards to land use planning is more the exception than the rule. The combination of Home Rule governance and limited municipal resources provides opportunities for inefficient competition between municipalities for residents, development and the municipal property tax base. This competition may be experienced most acutely in rural communities, where the perceived need to increase tax base to support infrastructure (e.g., roads) and services (e.g., schools) may lead to locally undesirable development that fragments the open space and agricultural lands that define the character of these communities. Competition between municipalities also results in the use of scarce resources to incentivize the relocation of businesses within the County as opposed to using these resources to attract businesses from outside the County.

Data Collection

Development data collected by individual municipalities varies by municipality in terms of the type of data and how often that data is collected. Consistent development data helps to track and compare the rate and type of growth occurring across Onondaga County at a broader scale. Without a consistent approach to data collection, understanding the cumulative impacts of newly developed lands on the built and natural environments in the County can be difficult. Onondaga County and other regional stakeholders can play a central role in tracking, benchmarking and sharing development data to help the community set goals and track progress on behalf of local stakeholders.

Civic Engagement

One of the most important components of planning is that of civic engagement and the importance of public input in ensuring that local citizens have the opportunity to shape the future of their community. By providing forums through which members of the community can provide input and affect the decision-making process, municipalities enhance the transparency of planning, increase trust in local officials and often end up with a more accurate, representative product. As such, it is important to provide opportunities for civic engagement in a variety of formats (e.g., formal hearings, public information meetings, websites) and locations and to solicit community feedback from a diverse audience.



Findings

- As a result of local government structure in New York State, the 35 municipalities that comprise Onondaga County allow for individual determination of the patterns and intensity of development, which can lead to inefficiencies and conflicting patterns at the regional level, and competition for jobs, residents and resources.
- Implementation of intermunicipal planning processes and projects may promote the long-term sustainability of Onondaga County.
- Onondaga County benefits from the wealth of organizations that encourage participation in community planning and government. Citizen engagement and ownership in the planning process is a critical component of good planning.
- Additional staff capacity and financial resources for planning and development review are required in most municipalities to support comprehensive planning, regional collaboration and the identification of community goals that shape development patterns.
- Mapping, development tracking and benchmarking of community goals is a vital component to planning and may be best collected at a countywide or regional level.
- The Onondaga County Planning Federation provides opportunities for municipal training and cooperation. Opportunities available through the Federation should be strengthened by providing more frequent programming or other educational resources.
- In support of their significant impact upon local property taxes, a greater degree of school districts inclusion within the comprehensive planning and land use decision making process may provide long-term benefits for the fiscal solvency of the school district.
- Development projects can affect multiple communities, particularly those located in close proximity to municipal boundaries. As such, it is important to encourage local and neighboring residents and governments to attend planning and zoning board meetings.
- The Onondaga County *Sustainable Development Plan*, the County's land use plan, is intended to set forth a shared consensus on regional goals and intentions for orderly development and resource allocation for all communities in the region. This plan should be considered and form the framework for local planning and zoning to ensure adherence to shared regional planning objectives.
- The Onondaga County *Sustainable Development Plan* is intended to be a 'living plan', a growing and evolving educational tool available and shared with municipalities with limited resources for planning.