

Comprehensive Plan

For the Town of German Flatts, New York

DRAFT FOR PUBLIC REVIEW

SEPTEMBER 25, 2024



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Table of Contents

Chapter 1. Comprehensive Planning Overview	1
What is a Comprehensive Plan?	1
Relationship Between Zoning-Enabling Laws and the Comprehensive Plan	1
What a Comprehensive Plan is Not	1
What Does a Comprehensive Plan Do?	1
Why Create and Update the Comprehensive Plan?	2
Town of German Flatts Comprehensive Planning Process	2
Chapter 2. Existing Conditions	4
Location	4
Local Government	4
Community Profile	4
Demographics	5
Economics	5
Households and Families	5
Housing, Education, and Ethnicity	5
Land Use	6
Transportation Network	7
Summary	8
Chapter 3. Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats	9
Introduction	9
Business and Economic Development	9
Transportation and Infrastructure	9
Historic Preservation, Tourism, and Outdoor Recreation	10
Agriculture and Open Space	10
Renewable and Alternative Energy	11
Social Equity and Vulnerable Populations	11
Chapter 4. Goals and Recommendations	12
Business and Economic Development	12
Transportation and Infrastructure	12
Historic Preservation, Tourism, and Outdoor Recreation	12
Agriculture and Open Space	12
Renewable and Alternative Energy	12
Social Equity and Vulnerable Populations	12

Chapter 1. Comprehensive Planning Overview

What is a Comprehensive Plan?

A comprehensive plan is an expression of goals and recommended actions to achieve those goals. The plan will guide the development of government structure as well as the natural and built environments. Significant features of comprehensive planning in most communities include its foundations for land use controls for the purpose of protecting the health, safety, and general welfare of the community's citizens. The Comprehensive Plan focuses on immediate and long-range protection, enhancement, growth, and development of community's assets. Materials included in the Comprehensive Plan include text and graphics, including but not limited to maps, charts, studies, resolutions, reports, and other descriptive materials. Once the Comprehensive Plan is completed, the Town Board follows a clearly defined, public process to adopt the plan. Development of a Comprehensive Plan in general is optional, as is the development of a plan in accordance with state comprehensive plan statutes. However, statutes can guide stakeholders through the process.¹

New York State Town Law §272-a(2) defines a "Comprehensive Plan as:

"The materials, written or graphic, including but not limited to maps, charts, studies, resolutions, reports and other descriptive material that identify the goals, objectives, principles, guidelines, policies standards, devices and instruments for the immediate and long-range protection, enhancement, growth and development of the town located outside the limits of any incorporated village or city."

Relationship Between Zoning-Enabling Laws and the Comprehensive Plan

Early zoning-enabling laws were fashioned to balance community needs with individual property rights. Drafters of the law required the actual zoning regulations to be based on a logical and comprehensive plan for the betterment of the community. The Comprehensive Plan was intended to connect the provisions of the law with the overall condition and character of the community. Comprehensive Plans provide insurance that the zoning law "bears a reasonable relation between the end sought to be achieved by the regulation and the means to achieve that end."² Town Law §263 and subsequent court decisions further establish that zoning regulations should be made in accordance with a Comprehensive Plan and that land-use decisions be made in accordance with a well-considered plan or Comprehensive Plan.

What a Comprehensive Plan is Not

The definitions in New York State Town Law §272-a(2) show that a Comprehensive Plan is a document which provides a vision for the future growth of a Town and offers guidance on how to achieve said vision. Comprehensive Plans are separate from enabling laws related to land-use regulations. Rather, the Comprehensive Plan should be viewed as the foundation for the creation of reasonable land-use controls that promote orderly development throughout the Town. Comprehensive Plans, once adopted, are not set in stone because conditions in the Town can change over time. As such, it is incumbent on the Town to regularly revisit the plan and make changes to the goals, recommendations, and action steps identified in this document.

What Does a Comprehensive Plan Do?

According to the "New York State Comprehensive Plan Development: A Guidebook for Local Officials", a Comprehensive Plan accomplishes three main tasks:

¹ New York State Comprehensive Plan Development: A guidebook for local officials. *Environmental Finance Center, Syracuse University (2014)*.

² Bassett, Edward M., *Zoning: The Laws, Administration, and Court Decisions During the First Twenty Years (1940)* p. 23.

- Provides a legal defense for regulations. Comprehensive Plans clearly state the objectives, intentions, identity, and assets of a Town and, as such, justify the creation and/or modification of land-use regulations that protect its values.
- Provides a basis for actions affecting development. Local officials can use the plan to allow for or deny development in certain areas of the Town.
- Helps establish policies relating to the creation and enhancement of community assets such as walkable business districts, neighborhood beautification programs, the preservation of agricultural land, etc. The establishment of clear policy goals and objectives can also greatly increase the Town's competitiveness for State and Federal-level grants and other funding opportunities.

Why Create and Update the Comprehensive Plan?

The quality and character of the community—its landscape, social opportunities, services, economy, and other attributes—play a large part in defining our quality of life. The Comprehensive Plan provides a starting point that can help assure that the community retains the qualities that make it an attractive place for people to live, work, and play. The Town of German Flatts has made the decision to engage in an inclusive, holistic planning process to craft a vision for future development and outline steps to ensure that the vision is realized. The Comprehensive Plan is designed to serve as a long-range guide for development and growth in the Town. It offers direction and focus for town officials and residents. Regular updates to the plan help to ensure that it reflects current public concerns and values and addresses changing economic conditions, property values, cultural institutions, school enrollment issues, infrastructure needs, and other issues discussed by the community.

Town of German Flatts Comprehensive Planning Process

Community Survey

A survey of residents was conducted as part of the initial information gathering process. The survey asked four questions intended to gauge residents' assessment of current conditions and their perception of the Town's ideal future. A sample of the survey is included in Appendix A. The survey responses revealed the following priorities:

- Economic Development
- Emergency Services
- Farmland Protection
- Forest Land Protection
- Historic Preservation
- Infrastructure Improvements
- Open Space Preservation
- Outdoor Recreation
- Property Maintenance
- Renewable/Alternative Energy
- Streetscape Improvements
- Tourism

Public Input Meetings

Community feedback has been solicited at regular Town Board meetings and special meetings with key stakeholders. These meetings have been instrumental in ensuring that residents' concerns are adequately considered. The meeting timeline is presented below. Meetings were held at the Town Community Center, on NYS Route 5S. Attendance records are in Appendix B and meeting minutes are in Appendix C.

Public Meeting #1: February 29, 2024

The first in the series of public input meetings provided an opportunity for the Comprehensive Plan committee to describe the purpose and process that will be employed to develop the Comprehensive Plan. Following the introduction, attendees were provided with an opportunity to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to the six priority categories identified in the resident survey. Refreshments were served and there was an opportunity for attendees to submit additional comments in writing, which several took advantage of.

Public Meeting #2: March 7, 2024

The second public input meeting began with a review of the process, to reiterate the intent to attendees who were at the first meeting and to provide valuable context to new attendees. Following the introduction, attendees were provided with another opportunity to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to the six priority categories identified in the resident survey. Refreshments were served and there was an opportunity for attendees to submit additional comments in writing, which several took advantage of.

Public Meeting #3: March 7, 2024

The third and final public input meeting again began with a review of the process, to reiterate the intent to attendees who were at the first or second meeting and to provide additional context to new attendees. Following the introduction, attendees identified goals and objectives that address the responses received in the previous meetings. Refreshments were served and there was an opportunity for attendees to submit additional comments in writing, which several took advantage of.

Chapter 2. Existing Conditions

Location

The Town of German Flatts, situated in Herkimer County, New York, is teeming with history, natural beauty, and a warm community atmosphere. Its strategic location along the Mohawk River and proximity to significant transportation routes has played a crucial role in shaping its past and present. German Flatts boasts a rich historical legacy, with its roots dating back to colonial times. Settled in the mid-18th century by German Palatine immigrants, the town experienced growth and cultural assimilation. The region's involvement in the American Revolutionary War and subsequent development as the Mohawk Valley became a key industrial hub contributed to its historical importance. German Flatts is blessed with picturesque landscapes and geographical diversity. Nestled along the southern bank of the Mohawk River, the town offers breathtaking views and recreational opportunities. Rolling hills, fertile farmland, and dense forests contribute to the natural beauty of the area. The unique geological formations, including the striking limestone cliffs of the Mohawk Valley, add to the allure of German Flatts. One of the town's defining features is the strong sense of community spirit and pride among its residents. As visitors and residents continue to appreciate the charm of German Flatts, it is crucial to preserve its historical landmarks, agricultural community, economic vitality, natural environment, and community spirit for generations to come.

Local Government

The Town of German Flatts is governed by a Supervisor-Town Board form of government. The Supervisor is the chief executive officer of the Town and the head of administrative branch of town government. The Supervisor is responsible for the proper administration of town affairs. The Town Board is responsible for legislative affairs, setting policy for Town employees, and managing and controlling the finances and property of the Town. The Town Board meets at 5:30pm on the 4th Wednesday of each month at the Town Community Center, located at 555 State Route 5S, Mohawk NY 13407. The Town of German Flatts has several departments that carry out the functions of local government. These are listed below:

- Assessor's Office
- Clerk's Office
- Codes Department
- Highway Department
- Receiver of Taxes
- Town Court

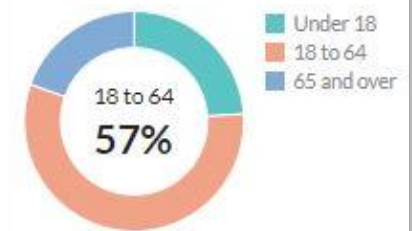
Community Profile

When planning for the future, it is important to obtain a clear understanding of current conditions and recent trends. Examining data trends will allow Town leaders to make informed decisions about the future of the Town of German Flatts. This section provides useful information on a wide range of topics affecting the social, economic, and environmental character of the Town. The demographic composition and current development patterns tell a story about the Town and its residents. Future policies rely on a strong understanding of these characteristics.

Demographics

The population of the Town of German Flatts is 12,351, a decrease of 907 (-6.8%) since 2010³. The median age of Town residents is 42.8, which is slightly lower than the Countywide median of 44.3 and approximately 10% higher than the statewide median of 39.2. Residents under the age of 18 represent 24% of the population and 20% of the population is over the age of 64. The Town population is split almost evenly between males (48%) and females (52%) with the overwhelming majority of residents being white and non-Hispanic (93%). These figures are nearly equal to the Countywide demographics. Per capita income in the Town is \$28,298, or about 10% lower than the Countywide figure while the median household income of \$64,309 is higher than the Countywide median of \$60,561.

Population by age category



Economics

Income

\$28,298

Per capita income

about 90 percent of the amount in
Herkimer County: \$30,791

about two-thirds of the amount in
New York: \$43,208

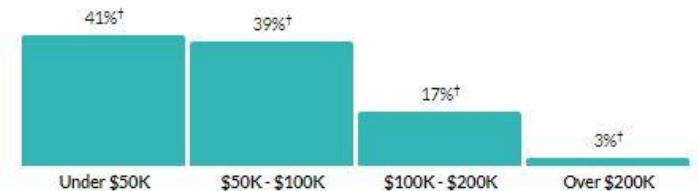
\$64,309

Median household income

a little higher than the amount in
Herkimer County: \$60,561

about 90 percent of the amount in
New York: \$75,157

Household income



The poverty rate of 12.8% is equal to the rest of Herkimer County and slightly less than the statewide rate of 13.5%. Workers age 16 and over spend 22.3 minutes commuting to work and most (86%) drive alone in a private vehicle. Only about 4% of Town residents carpool, 2% walk to work and 6% work from home.

Households and Families

There is a total of 4,960 households in the Town, representing 20.2% of total households in Herkimer County. The average household size of 2.5 persons is about the same as the countywide figure of 2.4. Most households (59%) are occupied by married couples. Half of all Town residents 15 years of age or older are married. 5.1% of women between the age of 15-50 have given birth within the past year, about 1.4 times the countywide rate of 3.8% and approximately 10% higher than the statewide rate of 4.7%.

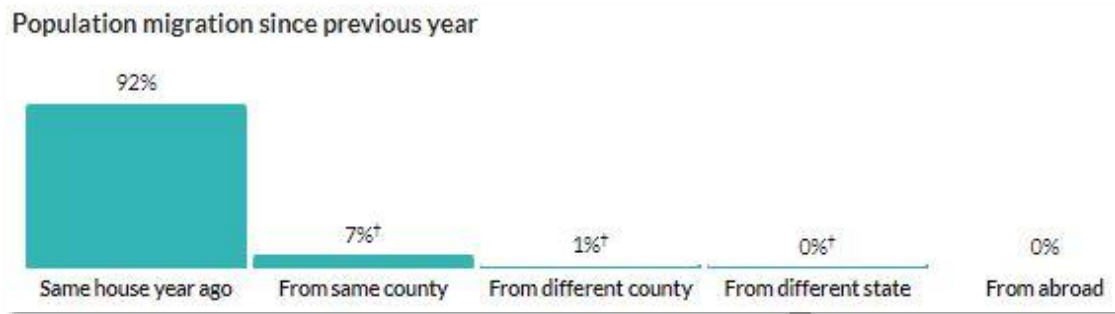
Population by household type



Housing, Education, and Ethnicity

There are 5,587 housing units in the Town, representing 17.2% of total housing units in Herkimer County. The occupancy rate of 89% is higher than the countywide rate of 75%. There is a greater concentration of renter-occupied housing units (30%) in the Town than overall in Herkimer County (25%). Single-unit homes make up about 2/3 of the Town's housing stock. Multi-unit dwellings and mobile homes make up 28% and 3% of the housing stock, respectively. The median value of owner-occupied housing units in the Town is \$85,400, about ¾ the value of owner-occupied units countywide. There is relatively little short-term geographical mobility in the Town. Only about 8.1% of Town residents have moved in the last year. Of the residents who have moved within the past year, most have moved from a different location in Herkimer County.

³ US Census Bureau, ACS 2021 5-year estimate.



While the percentage of Town residents over the age of 25 who've graduated from High School or higher exceeds the countywide and statewide rates, fewer individuals in the Town have completed post-secondary education. Nearly all children (99%) and adults (98%) in the Town speak only English at home and only 2.4% of Town residents are foreign-born. There are 823 recognized veterans living in the Town, 789 males and 34 females. While this is about the same as the countywide rate of 8.6%, it is more than double the statewide rate of 4.2%.^{4,5}

Educational attainment

91.5%

High school grad or higher

about the same as the rate in
Herkimer County: 90.9%

a little higher than the rate in New
York: 87.4%

24.4%

Bachelor's degree or higher

about 10 percent higher than the rate
in Herkimer County: 21.4%

about two-thirds of the rate in New
York: 38.1%

Land Use

The most intense development and use of land in the Town has traditionally followed the Erie Canal/I-90 corridor, with the greatest intensity of use being in the Villages of Ilion and Mohawk and along New York State Route 5S. Outside this corridor, the Town is characterized by a patchwork of active agricultural land, fallow fields, and mixed forest. There are clusters of homes in some locations along the State, County, and Town roads but the majority of residential development is on relatively large lots. This is reflective of the Town's history as a rural, agricultural community similar to many other upstate New York Towns. Figure 1 presents a land use map that illustrates patterns of uses within the Town.

⁴ US Census Bureau. Quick Facts, Town of German Flatts (NY).

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/germanflattstownherkimercountynewyork>

⁵ An interactive dashboard containing demographic information is available at

<https://censusreporter.org/profiles/06000US3604328750-german-flatts-town-herkimer-county-ny>

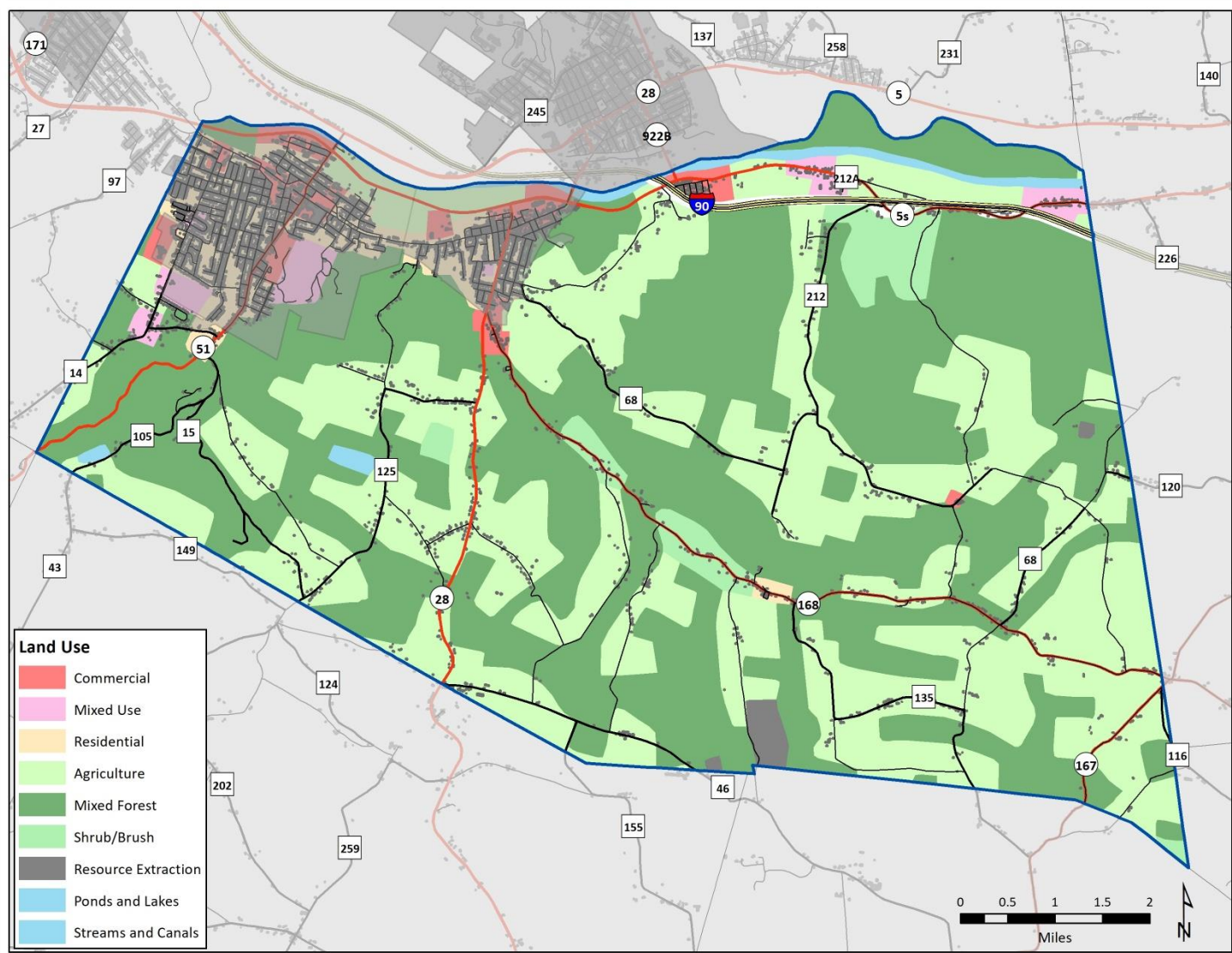


Figure 1. Land Use

Transportation Network

Three major transportation arteries that traverse the Mohawk Valley helped build the Empire State and helped the U.S. expand west – the Erie Canal, the New York State Thruway, and the water level rail line. Today, the corridor continues to play a vital role in the movement of people and products through New York State and beyond. The nearest New York State Thruway interchange (Exit 30) is located just north of the Town, in Herkimer, and provides Town residents with easy access to I-90 for out of town travel. However, Town residents rely heavily on the State highways, as well as the County and local roads to meet their daily travel needs. The climate, topography, and rural development pattern in the Town present challenges for County and Town Highway Department personnel who are responsible for ongoing maintenance and repairs. In rural communities, there are often limited alternate route options in the event of a road closure due to natural causes or planned construction projects. Detours can be excessively long, and weather conditions can add to the challenge of keeping roads safely open. Figure 2 presents the network of highways and roads that have played a major role in development throughout the Town. The hillshade in this map helps to show the topography of the landscape and the low density of local roads, especially in the eastern half of the Town, illustrates the rural nature of development.

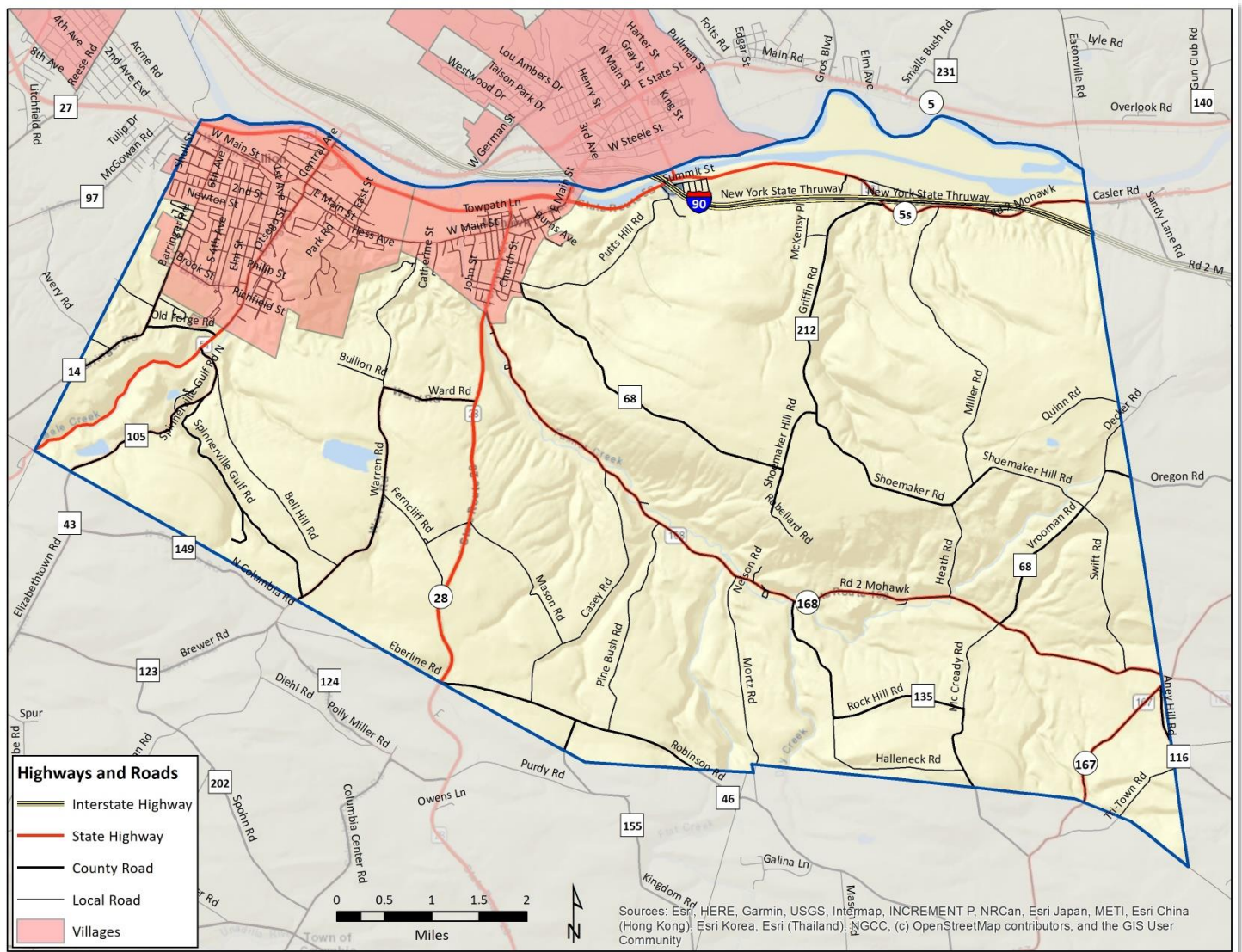


Figure 2. Transportation

Summary

The demographic characteristics, land use patterns, and transportation infrastructure at the primary components of the community upon which the Comprehensive Plan is built. As part of the Comprehensive Planning process, community leaders and residents have developed a deeper understanding of the community's collective vision for the future and constructed a road map to guide the Town into the future. This collective vision, along with the goals and objectives to achieve that vision are explained in the following sections of the plan.

Chapter 3. Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats

Introduction

A systematic approach to identifying assets and challenges helps a community objectively develop strategies to promote strengths, mitigate weaknesses, capitalize on opportunities, and proactively minimize the impact of threats. The SWOT analysis is a valuable tool in town comprehensive planning. It helps communities assess their internal strengths and weaknesses, as well as external opportunities and threats.

Strengths are internal attributes that provide an advantage. Examples include strong community engagement, robust infrastructure, and cultural heritage. In planning, towns identify and leverage these strengths to enhance quality of life and attract investment.

Weaknesses are internal factors that hinder progress. Examples include aging infrastructure, limited funding, or a lack of amenities. Addressing weaknesses ensures sustainable development and efficient resource allocation.

Opportunities are external factors that can be exploited positively. Examples include economic development, grants, and technological advancements. Towns use opportunities to drive growth, create jobs, and improve services.

Threats are external challenges. Examples include economic downturns, natural disasters, or regulatory changes. Anticipating and mitigating threats ensures resilience and sustained prosperity.

During the series of public meetings, residents and Town officials collaboratively discussed strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, as they apply to the six priority categories identified by the resident survey. The following outline represents a summary of input received during the public meetings.

Business and Economic Development

Strengths:

The community is strategically located near the NYS Thruway, has affordable property, high-speed internet, and Amish construction services.

Weaknesses:

There is a lack of coordination and promotional help, a weak job market, and a lack of public transportation and child care. The rural area lacks municipal sewer/water.

Opportunities:

There are opportunities to develop trailside amenities, market local businesses, and create a town newsletter. Attracting visitors to start businesses, collaborating with villages, and seeking grants are also opportunities.

Threats:

The closing of Remington Arms, overreliance on social media, high taxes on businesses, and a declining population are threats.

Transportation and Infrastructure

Strengths:

The community has interstate access with exits on both sides, as well as north/south connectors and is adjacent to the Erie Canal. There is limited sewer/water in some parts of town (an amenity that Village of Ilion and Mohawk have, as well as some parts of the Town of German Flatts).

Weaknesses:

There is a lack of public transportation, limited broadband access, and poor water quality in some areas.

Opportunities:

Canal tourism and USDA funding for water/sewer projects are opportunities.

Threats:

Match funding requirements for grants, flooding, and undersized bridges are threats.

Historic Preservation, Tourism, and Outdoor Recreation

Strengths:

There is a rich historical background and existing historical sites. The community has an existing walking trail (the Empire State Trail), a modern community center, the Fort Herkimer Church and Cemetery, and the recently rehabilitated schoolhouse.

Weaknesses:

There are limited food accommodations, no advertising, and safety concerns on trails. The community lacks a designated historic district.

Opportunities:

There is potential to promote historical education and events, farmers market, and historical/agricultural tourism. Developing amenities for cyclists on the canal trail, attracting NYS Thruway travelers, and creating a boat launch/pier are viable opportunities.

Threats:

There is a lack of communication, overregulation, and safety issues along the trail. Unchecked development and lack of appropriate local laws pose threats.

Agriculture and Open Space

Strengths:

The community has hunting and fishing habitat, local farms, access to the Adirondacks, and an Amish population preserving farming.

Weaknesses:

There is visual blight, properties in disrepair, and excess vacant land. The community lacks zoning and has experienced a loss of the dairy industry.

Opportunities:

Encouraging agricultural business, farmers market, and using open spaces for activities are opportunities. Developing unused land when appropriate and creating recreational fields and parks are also opportunities.

Threats:

Affordability issues, farmers downsizing, and development of large plots of land are threats.

Renewable and Alternative Energy

Strengths:

There are opportunities for solar and wind development while preserving land for continued agricultural, residential, and business productivity.

Weaknesses:

The community has limited local laws, has limited community solar program benefits, and lacks regulation to guide developments.

Opportunities:

Developing local laws to preserve land, generating tax revenue from projects, and integrating renewable energy into planning are opportunities. Looking to other municipalities for law examples and researching elevated solar are also viable opportunities.

Threats:

Opposition from neighbors, property value impact, wildlife endangerment, and disposal of panels are threats.

Social Equity and Vulnerable Populations

Strengths:

The community has a strong senior community with generational ties and a supportive youth community. There is a low cost of living and general safety.

Weaknesses:

There is a lack of transportation, affordable housing, senior programs, and day care. The community has experienced a loss of primary care medical facilities and sewer/water quality impacts.

Opportunities:

Engaging seniors, promoting existing programs, and using the community center are opportunities. Developing materials to inform about community center availability is also an opportunity.

Threats:

An aging population, increasing costs of youth activities, and homelessness leading to crime are threats.

Chapter 4. Goals and Recommendations

The Comprehensive Plan outlines a five to 10-year path forward for the Town. Developing achievable goals and a series of associated recommendations that help achieve these goals will help build the Town's capacity to address key planning challenges, while focusing on residents' identified priorities. The goals and recommendations contained in this section were identified through input gathered in the resident survey, stakeholder interviews, consultation with municipal officials, and through a series of public meetings. The Comprehensive Plan is also a living document. Goals and objectives are anticipated to change, and it will be the responsibility of the Town to work closely with business owners, residents, and other interested parties to incorporate changes into future updates to the Comprehensive Plan.

Based on the SWOT analysis, the Goals and Recommendations are categorized according to the previously discussed priority areas: Business and Economic Development; Transportation and Infrastructure; Historic Preservation, Tourism, and Outdoor Recreation; Agriculture and Open Space; Renewable and Alternative Energy; and Social Equity/Vulnerable Populations.

General

The goal is to develop local laws that encourage sustainable economic development, while preserving the rural character of the Town.

Developing a Town of German Flatts Zoning Code is an objective.

Business and Economic Development

The goal is to collaborate with villages, promote agribusiness, and identify town identity.

Developing and marketing an outlet for local producers is an objective.

Transportation and Infrastructure

The goal is to enhance public transportation options, improve broadband access, and address water quality issues.

Securing funding for infrastructure improvements and mitigating flooding risks are objectives.

Historic Preservation, Tourism, and Outdoor Recreation

The goal is to promote trail use, historical tourism, and create a town brand.

Communicating with County Tourism, participating in Canal Clean Sweep, and developing passive events are objectives.

Agriculture and Open Space

The goal is to engage farmers, develop recreational fields and parks, and set land aside to be undeveloped.

Renewable and Alternative Energy

The goal is to integrate renewable energy into planning and develop local laws.

Looking to other municipalities for law examples is an objective.

Social Equity and Vulnerable Populations

The goal is to improve access to medical care, promote community center use, and provide more opportunities to socialize.

Revisions for 9/25/2024 Town Board Review (this page will NOT be included in the final document):

1. The following Appendices were removed and will instead be filed at the Town Clerk's Office, along with the individual survey responses:

Appendix A. Comprehensive Plan Questionnaire Sample

Appendix B. Comprehensive Plan Meeting Sign-in Sheets

Appendix C. Comprehensive Plan Meeting Minutes

2. List of Town Department Heads:

Amy Coultier position changed from "Assessor (Trainee)" to "Assessor (Acting)".

3. (P. 11) Renewable and Alternative Energy

Strengths:

Original: There are opportunities for solar and wind development while preserving land for continued farm use.

Revised: There are opportunities for solar and wind development while preserving land for continued agricultural, residential, and business productivity.

Weaknesses:

"The community lacks local laws....." changed to "The community has limited local laws..."

4. Addition: (P. 12) Goals and Objectives

General

The goal is to develop local laws that encourage sustainable economic development, while preserving the rural character of the Town.

Developing a Town of German Flatts Zoning Code is an objective.