

4-Town Comprehensive Plan



DRAFT 11/17/08



Acknowledgements

4-Town Planning Committee

Town of Harrisburg

Steven Bernat
David Chase
Randy Nicol
Norman Roof

Town of Martinsburg

Terry Thisse
Paul Kelly

Town of Montague

Jan Bagdanowicz
Wendy Perry
David Andalora

Town of Pinckney

Sherry Harmych
Dan Pearson, Jr.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART I – SURVEY RESULTS

PART II – COMMUNITY PROFILE

DEMOGRAPHICS

Population
Regional Population Change
Household and Family Size
Housing
Age
Income
Employment and Occupation
Industry
Educational Attainment
Transportation to Work

FINANCE

Revenues
Expenditures
Tax Rates

PART III – VISION AND COMMUNITY GOALS

NATURAL RESOURCES & ENVIRONMENT

AGRICULTURE

HISTORIC PRESERVATION

TRANSPORTATION

RECREATION & OPEN SPACE

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & OTHER

PART IV – LAND USE AND DEVELOPMENT POLICIES

SENSITIVE LANDS & RESOURCES

RURAL AREAS

HAMLET RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOODS

HAMLET AREAS

APPENDIX A – PLAN MAPS

Map 1 – Topography

Map 2 – Land Use

Map 3 – Population Density

Map 4 – Road Network

Map 5 – Agricultural Districts

Map 6 – Important Farmlands

Map 7 – Watersheds

Map 8 – Development Constraints (wetlands, steep slopes, streams, water bodies, public lands)

Map 9 – Snowmobile & ATV Trails

Map 10 – School Districts

Map 11 – Special Districts

Map 12 – Historic Resources

LAND USE AND DEVELOPMENT POLICIES

SENSITIVE LANDS & RESOURCES

There are many areas in the town which have a limited suitability or are inherently unsuitable for development. There are other areas in which development should be avoided due to the valuable natural character of the area, character which would be lost or damaged if disturbed. Areas which are either unsuitable or fragile include floodplains, wetlands, steep slopes, hydric soils, and stream corridors.

Wetlands

Character: Wetlands are areas where groundwater is exposed on the surface of the ground. These areas often act as recharge areas, areas for filtering and cleaning water, and as significant wildlife habitat.

Where located: Certain major wetlands have been mapped by the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). These include only wetlands of greater than 12.4 acres (5 hectares). The 4-Towns have an abundance of these wetlands. They are scattered throughout the towns (see the Development Constraints map).

Consequences of Development: Wetlands are generally considered a severe constraint to development. Development can lead to loss of valuable and irreplaceable wildlife habitat. Wetlands are particularly important as they may directly recharge groundwater supplies and are vulnerable to pollution. Development can also lead to a loss of valuable open space. Development of these areas is expensive, as landfill is usually needed and flood protection is often necessary.

A permit is required from DEC to undertake certain activities within 100 feet of a designated wetland. DEC classifies wetlands in four classes ranging from Class 1, which provide the most benefits, to Class IV, which provide the fewest benefits. It is more difficult to get a permit to alter a Class I wetland than to alter a Class IV wetland.

Steep Slopes

Character: These are slopes greater than 10 percent, which means that there is a vertical rise of ten feet for each 100 feet of horizontal distance.

Where located: Steep slopes can be found in each of the 4 towns, however, the major steep slopes are located in Martinsburg along the eastern escarpment of the Tug Hill Plateau (see the Development Constraints map).

Consequences of Development: Slopes of less than 10 percent are generally considered slight constraints on development. Slopes of between 10 and 15 percent are generally considered moderate constraints on development. Slopes of greater than 15 percent are considered severe constraints on development. The development of slopes is not recommended for several reasons. There are some environmental concerns, such as erosion and stream sedimentation. It is also more expensive for communities to service development on steep slopes with roads and other community facilities.

Stream Corridors

Character: Stream corridors act as important fish and wildlife habitats. They may also be important for their significance as drainage conduits. Some have relatively steep slopes.

Where located: The 4 towns are drained by the Black River watershed, Lake Ontario watershed and a small portion of Oneida Lake watershed.

Consequences of Development: Stream corridors must be developed very carefully so as not to destroy their amenity. Improper development can lead to erosion of the stream banks, resulting in siltation of the stream and the loss of stabilizing soil. Water quality can be impaired, and the recreational use of the stream degraded. The aesthetic qualities of the stream may likewise be destroyed by improper development, thus degrading the quality of life in the town. The NYS Department of Environmental Conservation requires a permit for certain construction activities that affect stream beds or banks.

SENSITIVE LANDS AND RESOURCES POLICIES

- 1. Development taking place in floodplain areas and wetlands should be limited to those uses that will not adversely affect water quality.**
- 2. Sewage disposal systems should be properly separated from drinking water sources.**
- 3. Lots should be large enough to ensure that sewage which is disposed of by conventional on-site septic systems can safely percolate, and that wells will not overdraw groundwater supplies (typically 1.5 – 3.0 acres).**
- 4. Uses and structures should be properly set back from streams, lakes, ponds, and wetlands.**
- 5. Development should be avoided in areas with steep slopes.**
- 6. Land disturbing activities should be conducted in accordance with proper erosion control measures and/or NYS mining regulations.**
- 7. Landfills, toxic and nontoxic, should be prohibited town-wide.**

RURAL AREAS

Rural Character

An important attribute of the 4-Towns is its rural character. Low-density development, scenic views, ample open spaces, and a diverse landscape are all identified as important characteristics of the 4-Town's physical environment. An abundance of forests, brush lands, wetlands and open farmlands contribute to a varied and diverse landscape, which gives the town its rural flavor.

Rural character can be quickly destroyed by poorly planned or unplanned development. Rural sprawl; a lack of effective buffering, screening, and landscaping techniques; the proliferation of unattractive commercial signs and billboards; and the strip development of road frontages all contribute to a loss of rural character.

The maintenance of rural character is increasingly important to the economy of the North Country, both as a means of accommodating tourism, and as a means of providing an attractive quality of life to potential employers and employees looking to locate in the area. This can be accomplished, in part, by keeping development density low, and retaining appropriate open spaces, trees and other vegetation on the site of new development.

Critical Road Network

Federal, State and County Highways (State Routes 12, 177 and County Routes 14, 17, 20, 25, 28 in Harrisburg, 22, 29, 30, 31, 32, 34 in Martinsburg, 28 in Montague, and 21, 18, 28, 175, and 194 in Pinckney) connect the 4-Towns to the region. It is critically important that the function of these routes be maintained. A major threat to this is strip development. This type of development encourages usage of principal highways for local traffic and degrades the ability of the highway to convey regional traffic. Strip development leads to numerous "curb cuts" or access points on the highway. An increasing number of access points increases the number of points where conflicts between automobiles can occur, thus increasing accidents. This reduces the ability of the highway to accommodate high-speed travel. The primary function of the road, which is to provide inter-municipal mobility, is gradually undermined by the

competing function of serving as a local road to provide access to individual properties. Encouraging shared driveways is one way the town can preserve highway function.

Agriculture and Working Lands

Productive farm and forest lands are important and valuable economic and cultural assets, which must be managed wisely.

Potential Threats to Agriculture in the 4-Towns: Nonfarm uses mixed into agricultural areas may be a problem, particularly when they are residential in nature. Agriculture is an industry. It involves many activities which may be incompatible with residential living such as irregular hours of operation, the use of heavy machinery, the spraying of chemicals, the spreading of manure---unpleasant noise, lights, and smells. Urban and suburban residents often move to rural areas for open space, peace, and quiet, and then complain about the industrial aspects of agriculture. Residents often become antagonists to agricultural operations, advocating interference with, and limitations on agriculture operations making coexistence difficult.

There is evidence of a general decline in the efficiency of farm operations when nonfarm dwellings become too prevalent. Nonfarm land uses scattered throughout farming areas make it less economical to operate farms. At some point, farms are driven out of operation by the difficulties of competing with nonfarm uses. Studies have indicated that between 2 and 2.5 nonfarm dwellings per 100 acres of farmland can make agricultural operation difficult to conduct.

Means of Protecting and Preserving Agriculture: There are several means of preserving and protecting agriculture. Most of these means may only be initiated through local action. New York State also has an agricultural protection program initiated through the counties.

Analysis of Farmland Protection Schemes: The loss of farmlands to development in this region has been characterized mainly by small, incremental development decisions being made by farmers to subdivide small parcels over long periods of time. Much of the farmland that has been abandoned has not been developed, but has reverted to succession growth. Therefore, development pressures are not a major factor in agricultural loss in this region. The general health of the dairy farming industry appears to be the primary factor in farmland loss.

Agricultural Protection in the 4-Towns: A balanced approach to agricultural protection would seem to be appropriate in the 4-Towns. There is recognition that agriculture may be increasingly less economically viable in the future. The trend towards the abandonment of farms and the decline of the farm economy will most likely continue, although at an unknown rate. This may eventually lead to significant loss of agricultural support infrastructure, which in turn will lead to an acceleration of the decline in agriculture. Agriculture may not decline, however. In hopes that economic conditions may change in favor of this region, it would be prudent to secure some degree of viable agricultural lands for future production.

Commercial Uses

The 4-Towns should be prepared to locate mixed residential/commercial or purely commercial nodes in suitable areas where market forces dictate. Intersections of county and/or state highways are typically the best locations for these nodes. Aside from the fact that these locations give businesses better access, these locations alleviate traffic because cars can disperse in three or more directions (as opposed to two if a business is located in the middle of a road segment). Some of these nodes might then have the potential to become the focus for hamlet development combining appropriate commercial and residential mixes of uses. The hamlet of Barns Corners is one such area.

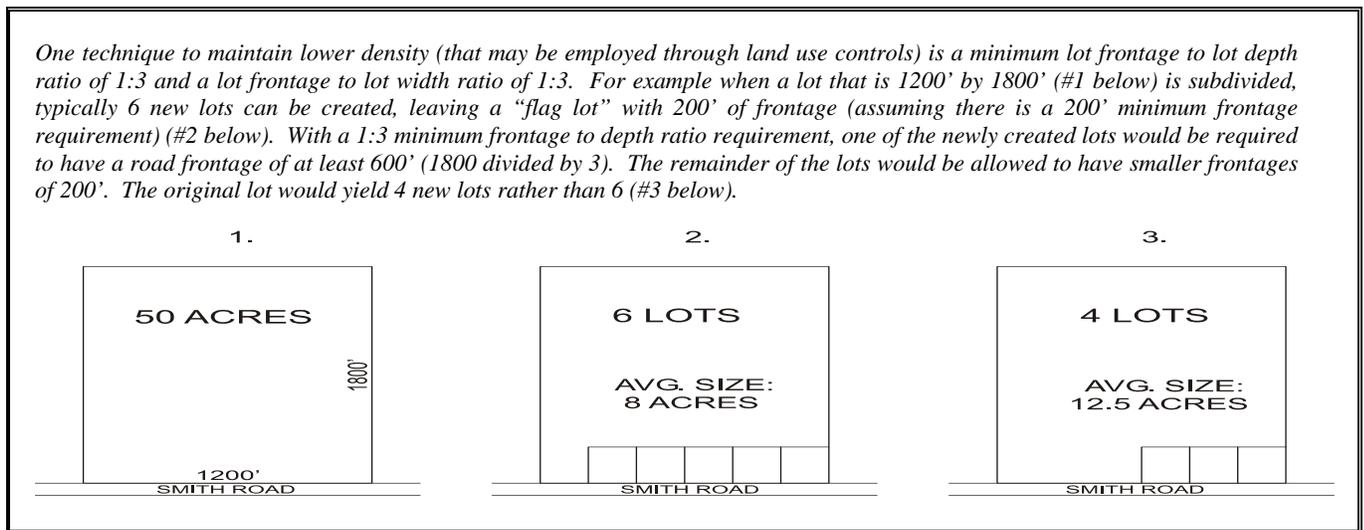
Home-based businesses: Home-based businesses are becoming increasingly popular. It is important to the health of the local economy to accommodate such business start-ups where the use can be demonstrated to be in harmony with the neighborhood. Nonresidential uses located in close proximity to residences need special care to mitigate any negative impacts, particularly in higher density residential areas. Controls on the intensity of the use (site lighting, signs, parking, aesthetics, traffic generation, noise, and other such characteristics) are important. The allowed use of the site must be clearly defined so that subsequent owners and changes in use do not alter the site so as to detract from the neighborhood.

Residential Uses

Historical Patterns of Residential Development: The majority of the existing and new residential construction in the 4-Towns is single-family detached dwellings. The single family dwelling pattern has historically predominated, usually at very low densities on isolated tracts of land scattered throughout the 4-Towns. Houses are usually on lots, which have been subdivided one or two at a time, out of former farmlands or woodlots. Manufactured, modular and mobile homes are an important part of the local housing stock. They are popular as affordable housing, and are a traditional housing type in the region.

Reasons for the Existing Pattern: Residential development has been forced to locate largely based upon the availability of well water, and soil suitability for on-site sewage disposal. Existing constraints created by these factors have necessitated very low-density construction, as on-site sewage disposal systems often require at least 20,000 square feet (and often up to 2 acres) for proper functioning.

Density: The density of dwellings (the number of dwelling units per square mile) should remain low for several reasons. Not only does increasing residential density have a deleterious effect on working lands, open space, and rural character, it also increases traffic problems, especially at intersections. Also, the more development that takes place on town roads, the more use these roads receive, and the more maintenance costs rise. This is an issue as transportation costs made up a large percentage of the 4-Town's annual budgets.



Variety in Residential Development Patterns: There are a number of forms that residential developments can take, depending on the economics of the development and the goals to be achieved. Larger scale single-family subdivisions in rural areas are usually of three patterns. They can be linear along existing roads, they can cover entire tracts of land, or they can be in a clustered configuration.

Linear roadside subdivisions have a negative effect on the function of major highways, by allowing an excessive number of entrances, which endanger traffic flows. While the preservation of open space may be a desirable goal,

a pattern of open space locked up behind a row of houses along the road is often an undesirable pattern. The open space may be inaccessible to the public for recreation and enjoyment. It may also be unseen. It places new housing construction on display, not the unique landforms, vistas, vegetation, and agricultural activities which form the character of the town. The linear pattern may contribute little to, and may ultimately detract from, the preservation of the rural character and quality of life which makes the 4-Towns a unique place.

Conventional subdivisions (typically seen in suburban areas) completely consume all land in the subdivision area. The open space is dispersed in small pieces to individual homeowners. While giving each landowner a small piece of private property, a conventional subdivision does not reserve enough open space to meet many important community objectives. The open space in a conventional subdivision, while constituting a major part of the subdivision is configured in such a way that its visual impact is significantly diminished or negated. A conventional subdivision, even with massive amounts of open space, has no rural character.

The cluster development pattern has the advantage of configuring open space in a manner where it more suitably meets community needs. It can be consolidated to protect large areas of sensitive lands or agricultural areas, or it can be used for parklands or recreation areas. More importantly, strategically placed open space can be used to help retain community character. Cluster subdivisions also reduce the amount of public facilities needed, where they are necessary, as distances between dwelling units are reduced.

The disadvantages of cluster subdivisions are that the clustered units sometimes require public facilities, which would not be necessary in a more dispersed development configuration. Cluster developments are often required to feature community water and/or sewage disposal systems in order to comply with health code requirements. Thus, unit cost may be significantly increased in some cases. A second disadvantage is that the cluster open space must be managed. This means that the municipality, the developer, a homeowners association, or some other party such as a land trust, must be created or induced to accept responsibility for maintenance of, and liability for, the open space.

Variety in Residential Dwelling Types: It is important that the town provide opportunities for a variety of residential types and situations. Opportunities should be provided for homes for people of all ages and income levels, at various densities. In pursuing this objective, it is important to accommodate accessory apartments, mobile homes on individual lots, mobile home parks, single-family dwellings, duplexes, and multiple-family dwellings.

Accessory Apartments: One type of living arrangement is the accessory apartment, also known as the “granny flat” or “ECHO” (elder cottage housing opportunity) housing. This is commonly a small apartment allowed in a single-family dwelling or on the same lot with a single-family dwelling, usually no more than 500 square feet in area. It is designed to be clearly subordinate to the single-family use on the premises, so as not to have the impacts of a multi-family dwelling. Additional regulations may be placed on accessory apartments such as restricting entrances to the side or rear of the principal structure. This provides an apartment large enough for one or two people, but small enough to maintain the character of the area as a predominantly single-family neighborhood. This idea has been very popular in the North Country as a means of providing additional housing opportunities as well as for providing extra income to homeowners without seriously impacting the character of the neighborhood. This type of living arrangement usually has very low impact on neighborhoods, and may be quite popular with the public, as well as providing badly needed housing opportunities.

Mobile Homes: Mobile homes are also a popular North Country housing opportunity. They can create problems, however, when a preponderance of them in an area begins to discourage other higher valued housing types from locating in that area. The experience of many communities is that large numbers of unregulated mobile homes may have the effect of eroding the local tax base due to rapid depreciation and aesthetic deterioration.

There are two things that can be done to lessen the impact of mobile homes. These are 1) prohibit mobile homes in some areas of the 4-Towns, thus leaving land free and available for higher valued development, 2) establish mobile home design standards, thus making mobile homes better neighbors to conventional housing.

Design standards can make a significant difference to mobile home appearance. The most effective design considerations include providing 1) a pitched roof, 2) the exterior siding of traditional site-built homes, and 3) horizontal dimensions more approximating site-built homes. Proper site location along with accessory buildings and screening can significantly change the appearance of horizontal dimensions.

These design improvements can make mobile homes fit much better into neighborhoods of conventional housing, protecting housing values and the community tax base. These design improvements will increase the cost of housing, however, so they may not be appropriate in all areas allowing mobile homes. Some communities set aside areas of the town, as well as mobile home parks, for mobile homes without design improvements.

RURAL AREAS DEVELOPMENT POLICIES

Rural Character

- 1. Development density (the number of lots per square mile) should be compatible with a rural environment and lower than in hamlet areas.**
- 2. Land should be developed in a manner that preserves important habitats and Natural Heritage program sites.**
- 3. Trees, vegetation and other landscape features should be retained as much as possible on development sites. Uses should be appropriately landscaped with native species so as to fit into the rural setting.**
- 4. The proliferation of commercial signs and billboards should be prohibited and permitted signs should be compatible with the rural character of the 4-Towns.**
- 5. Historic sites, buildings and other structures which are fundamental to the character of the town should be preserved and protected.**
- 6. Messy building and yard conditions should be prohibited.**

Critical Road Network

- 7. Land parcels fronting on major highways should have adequate frontage (~300-400 feet) to prevent an excessive number of highway access points.**
- 8. Highway access points should be placed at safe locations.**
- 9. Adequate setbacks should be required for structures built on major roads.**

Agriculture and Working Lands

- 10. Nonfarm intrusions into agricultural areas should be minimized, thus decreasing conflicts with existing agricultural operations.**
- 11. Agricultural support uses should be allowed in close proximity to primary agricultural areas.**

Commercial Uses

- 12. Commercial uses should preferably be sited at road intersections.**
- 13. Scattered commercial site development can be allowed in certain parts of the 4-Towns. Standards for buffer zones, screening, building size and bulk, impervious surfaces, lighting, noise, odor, signs, on-site circulation, parking and loading, access, drainage and erosion control should be used to ensure that the impacts of scattered-site development are controlled.**
- 14. Home based businesses should be allowed but must not negatively impact neighboring properties in terms of aesthetics, increased traffic, noise and pollution.**

Residential Uses

- 15. Cluster residential developments preserving agricultural and wooded open space should be encouraged whenever possible.**

16. **Multi-family dwellings should be permitted, but should maintain the appearance of single family dwellings.**
17. **Accessory apartments should be permitted, but with appropriate standards for the areas where they are located.**
18. **Mobile homes should be permitted in most areas, but in some areas should be subject to design controls appropriate for the particular neighborhood.**

Appropriate for Martinsburg:

HAMLET RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOODS

The hamlets of Martinsburg and Glenfield have many attractive blocks of streets lined with houses. These areas have a traditional small town feel and create a sense of community for their residents. Most are also within a short walk of the hamlet downtown or core area. Although these streets are primarily residential, some institutional uses, such as churches and schools, and small commercial operations are located along them.

Lots are typically small, ranging from around 9,000 square feet to 20,000 square feet with frontages ranging from approximately 40 ft. to 160 ft. Buildings are typically two stories and are located relatively close to the street. This relationship between building height and the space between buildings on opposite sides of a street creates spatial enclosure which creates a very comfortable environment for pedestrians. This is because the human eye prefers a building height to street width ratio of 1:3 (street width includes all space between building facades including front yards and the street). Spatial enclosure is lost if the height to width ratio exceeds 1:6.

The hamlets of Martinsburg and Glenfield are served by public water and feature sidewalks, curbs and street trees (in various conditions). Infill residential development should be encouraged in these hamlets as should development of new residential streets (where soil and other environmental conditions permit).

It is important that neighborhoods in Martinsburg and Glenfield provide opportunities for a variety of residential types and situations. Opportunities should be provided for homes for people of all ages and income levels, at various densities. In pursuing this objective, it is important to accommodate single-family dwellings, accessory apartments, duplexes, and multiple-family dwellings. It is also important, however, that duplexes and multi-family dwellings simulate the appearance of single-family dwellings and maintain the street line (average setback) established by neighboring dwellings.

Policies

1. **Lots should be kept in the 7,500 to 24,000 square feet range so that efficient use of existing infrastructure (sewer system, sidewalks, etc.) is made.**
2. **Some nonresidential uses should be allowed mainly on corner lots, but only if they are of a similar bulk as neighboring residences and do not alter the residential character of the area.**
3. **Buildings should range from one to two stories in height.**
4. **Buildings should respect a maximum setback or “build-to” line.**
5. **Future streets should be laid out in a block pattern that respects the current one. Cul-de-sacs should be discouraged unless absolutely necessary to preserve environmental features.**
6. **Accessory apartments and multi-family dwellings should be in character with single-family dwellings.**

HAMLET AREAS

The hamlet core areas are home to institutional uses, such as post offices, municipal buildings, libraries, as well as the majority of the commercial retail and service businesses in the hamlets. Residences are also present in the

form of apartments in the upper floors of commercial buildings and in occasional single-family dwellings and multi-family dwellings. Most buildings are one and two stories and are sited very close to the street right-of-way creating a strong building edge. These areas are the best location for institutional uses and retail and service commercial uses. These uses should be concentrated in the cores (through zoning) and not be allowed to “spill” out into the surrounding residential neighborhoods. This control creates more traffic for existing businesses (due to their concentration), and preserves the residential character of the surrounding neighborhoods.

Policies

- 1. Institutional uses, especially town government facilities, should be encouraged in the hamlet areas.**
- 2. Commercial uses of appropriate scale, particularly retail sales and services, should be highly encouraged in the hamlet areas.**
- 3. Residential uses are appropriate in the hamlets, but should be encouraged primarily as second floor apartments above commercial storefronts in the hamlet core.**
- 4. The pedestrian friendliness of the cores should be enhanced through human scale building setbacks, street trees, sidewalks, and street furniture.**
- 5. Buildings in the cores should have a maximum footprint size of 20,000 square feet and range from 20 to 35 feet in height.**
- 6. The aesthetic features of the cores (i.e. building facades and signs) should be in good condition, and in harmony with the traditional historic character of the hamlet areas.**