

An Overview of Tompkins County

We have a beautiful home. Few would dispute that -- even when dressed in March's soggy palette. It may be true that Tompkins County does not offer as much spectacle and grandeur as some locales, but its pastoral blend of farmland, forest, and water is deeply pleasing to human sensibilities. This particular part of the Finger Lakes landscape is further enriched by the multiple effects of an education-based economy, giving Tompkins County enviable reserves of social capital to augment its natural capital. Despite this relative abundance, citizens of the county face the same escalating and worrisome trends of other communities.

A recent "Compass II" survey, commissioned by the local United Way and coordinated by the county's Human Services Coalition, asked 500 community households and several hundred "key informants" to identify both the priority needs in Tompkins County and the assets we have on hand to address those needs. Problems related to employment, housing, health care, child care, and poverty were identified as critical by residents, employers, and service providers (Horn, 2003). More recent community discussion has focused on worrisome increases in school and municipal budgets, causing significant increases in property taxation rates.

Most of these problems are interwoven, and a common thread is found in the imbalance between wages for many jobs and the cost of living in Tompkins County. Although our official poverty rate for households is "only" 7% (the U.S. average is 9%), respondents to the Compass II survey indicated that their primary problems were related to *affordable* housing, *affordable* child care, and *affordable* health care (TCAD (Tompkins County Area Development), 2003; Horn, 2003). *Affordable* property taxes would doubtless be added to that list by many businesses and homeowners today.

Wanted: Jobs that Sustain Families

Since money seems to be a major problem, we can start by looking at employment and economic growth conditions in the county. On the surface, we are relatively affluent. Median family income is \$53,041, compared to the national average of \$50,046. Employment rates have been better in Tompkins County than across New York State or the nation since 1999, though growth has been flat (TCAD, 2003).

Education services dominate our local economy with 20% of the jobs and almost half of the economic base in the county (TCAD, 1999b). This is highly unusual. Nationally, education is only about 1% of the national gross product; whereas our \$1 billion education industry is 23% of our local gross product (TCAD, 1999b). Cornell University and Ithaca College have been able to insulate the local workforce from unemployment for many years due to continued strong enrollments, even as endowments and government funding streams have shrunk (TCAD, 2003). Further economic benefits are due to the high percentage of education budgets spent on salaries (primarily spent locally) and purchase of local supplies (TCAD, 1999b).

A different story is told in other employment sectors. Manufacturing jobs tend to pay well, and this sector has been the hardest hit recently (TCAD, 2003), after offering much promise in the eighties and nineties

(TCAD, 1999b), and possessing the highest growth rate (18.7%) of all sectors between 1996-2001 (Tompkins County Workforce Development Board, 2003a). Meanwhile, relatively low-paying retail, trade, health care and child care jobs are some of the most common job openings in the Southern Tier today (NYS DOL, 2004). According to the Tompkins County Living Wage Coalition (2004), over one-third of NYS residents do not have sufficient income to meet their basic needs; additionally, New York has the worst income inequality and the largest gap between its minimum wage and average wage in the U. S. Increasing the minimum wage to \$7/hr would directly benefit about 2,000 county residents (75% of whom are fulltime, adult workers), and indirectly boost the wages of another 2,000 local employees (ibid).

At the other end of a “living wage” paycheck there needs to be a viable business. We are fortunate to have a dedicated community of business leaders that has worked for many years to craft a multi-dimensional economic development strategy. TCAD has taken a more holistic approach to economic development than that found in more traditional communities. Their primary focus has been on expanding our export industries, including education, high-tech manufacturing, utilities, agriculture, and tourism, and on stopping retail leakage by adding more of the national “big box” franchises. But they have also collaborated on programs protecting quality of life (support of the arts, preserving village and rural character), increasing the skills of the workforce, and providing appropriate infrastructure development. Adding infrastructure that protects natural resources, provides key services such as high speed communications, and makes efficient use of water, sewer, and other facilities sets the stage for appropriate economic development (TCAD, 1999a, 1999b, 2003).

One of TCAD’s goals is to see a growing middle class that reflects the benefits of improved skills and job opportunities for lower-income families (TCAD, 2003). There has been some shifting out of lower-income levels for some households over the past twenty years (TCAD, 2003), but those gains may have been more than eliminated by increases in cost of living, especially for young families. The solution for some workers will be to obtain new skills needed in better-paying manufacturing, technical, or professional services jobs.

High-tech manufacturing jobs provide over 7% of local jobs, compared to a national average of under 5%. Both TCAD and the Metropolitan Development Authority (out of Syracuse) have developed plans emphasizing the importance of creating new high-tech jobs, building upon the key industry clusters we already have in biosciences, precision metalworking, digital and electronic devices, and environmental systems (TCAD, 2003; MDA, 2004). Rates of technology transfer and commercialization from Cornell University and Syracuse University lag behind the national average for research institutions. Lack of connectivity and critical mass among companies in these sectors also dampens our potential for job creation (MDA, 2004). The new ‘Essential New York Initiative’ hopes to launch a \$12 million effort to bring these new tech jobs to our area through a three-pronged program to stimulate technology, attract talented and skilled workers, and increase the “tolerance” of upstate communities for building diverse, creative partnerships (ibid).

It may seem contradictory to be developing programs to recruit new high-tech workers to our region when local residents are in need of better-paying jobs. But the demographics of jobs has several layers of complexity. At the macro level, population growth in Tompkins County was only 2.9% over the 1990s, compared to 13.2% for the nation. The region surrounding us saw a *decline* in population of 2.7% during

that period (Tompkins County Workforce Development Board, 2003a). Our slow population growth has been beneficial in terms of slowing the demand for new infrastructure and services, but it poses the need for adaptive responses in the business sector. The Tompkins County population is aging “more” than elsewhere, with the 45-54 year-old cohort increasing 56% in the last decade (U.S. average was 48%) (ibid). This reflects the maturation of the baby boomers as well as a net in-migration of boomers into our county, perhaps for the quality of life they can expect during their retirement years.

Meanwhile, those in the 35-44 year-old group decreased 5%, compared to a national increase of 20%. These folks either aged into the next cohort, or left and were not replaced by immigrants. But the most worrisome trend was the 18% decrease in people aged 25-34 (ibid). Our young, non-students are leaving – either for other regions with more jobs or across the county line to find housing they can afford.

If our economic development strategy pays off and we are able to create new better-paying careers for our young people, we would be able to keep our population structure more stable as the baby boomers age out of the workforce. But, does our local population have the skill sets needed for the jobs we hope to create? The Compass II survey documented that both residents and key informants ranked underemployment and unemployment as a critical problem. Our county workforce has a much higher level of education than the national average (summed up locally by the phrase “even our mail carriers have Ph.D.s”). But, like the rest of our nation, we have a severe skills mismatch at this time. Mid-level workers find themselves overqualified for the low-paying retail sector and underqualified for technology jobs. Down-sized professionals discover they must search for ways to “retool” themselves to fit into expanding sectors like health care. This results in a tight labor market, with many employers considering the majority of their job openings difficult to fill (TCWDB, 2003b).

The Tompkins County Workforce Development Board has identified three priority issues: inadequate workforce skills, an unstable workforce, and declining public funds for helping workers (2003a). The issue of skill sets is especially worrisome for our youth. It is estimated that “60% of new jobs will require skills possessed by only 20% of young people entering the labor market” (ibid). The situation is expected to worsen due to the oncoming retirement of large percentages of our engineers, scientists, nurses, skilled machinists, and construction workers. Nationwide, we are projecting a surplus of 19 million jobs over workers by 2028 (ibid).

The Tompkins Workforce New York System has worked hard to create a comprehensive program to assist both employers and job seekers. For example, they have recently created a “one-stop shopping” career center located in Center Ithaca on the Commons, supported by a partnership of various service providers; a career group for high-end job seekers; and are working on a new program to assist those with few marketable skills and significant barriers to employment. Despite the increasing need for assistance with skills (re)training and job placement, shrinking public budgets have caused severe underfunding of these programs at a time when we most need a comprehensive intervention in the labor market to prepare for the projected population shifts (ibid).

Infrastructure Investments for Vital Communities

Back in 2002, the only “critical problem” that householders noted for their public infrastructure was that

of poor road and/or traffic conditions (Horn, 2003). Now, the condition of those roads has deteriorated further, inspiring the town's daily paper to reveal the city budget woes that led to a crisis of delayed maintenance and mounting public debt (Phillips, 2004). This particular outcome is perhaps the most visible result of years of escalating costs for city services while population and property values stagnated and poverty has concentrated within the city's boundaries.

We may be on the verge of recovery from this difficult situation, as various development projects have moved into construction after years of planning. The City of Ithaca outlined an economic development plan in 1998 that relied upon increasing tax revenues to cover the city's growing costs through significant infrastructure and business development in the City's Southwest Park area, Route 13 corridor, Inlet Island, and the central business district of downtown (City of Ithaca, 1994a; City of Ithaca, 1998a; City of Ithaca, 1998b; Trancik, 1992; City of Ithaca, 2000). The theme in these plans is one of economic diversification, primarily aimed at expanding the tax base through light industry and "big box" development in the Southwest and along Rt. 13S, and mixed-use, high-density projects combining retail, commercial office, and residential development along the waterfront and near the Commons. This has been the largest campaign to grow the city in decades.

The Commons has been the focus of most of the recent capital investments with \$75 million going toward the 250,000 square feet (sf) Gateway Plaza, Cayuga Green, and Seneca Place projects. In 2002, another 500,000 square feet of commercial space was slated for the county with a total of \$102 million for eight projects approved by the Industrial Development Agency (TCAD, 2003). Inlet Island is about to make significant progress in its design plan with installation of a new promenade as part of the Cayuga Waterfront Trail system, along with a 60,000-sf health and fitness facility (Raygor, 2004). Compared to the controversy over development in the southern part of Ithaca, downtown and waterfront development has been welcomed by most citizens because of the presumed long-term benefits to the overall community of a high density mixture of citizens living, working, and entertaining themselves in "urban villages."

The Ithaca Downtown Partnership (IDP) has provided ongoing leadership in promoting a vision of a strong central business district which serves as the "economic, social, and cultural heart of Tompkins County" (Ferguson, 2004). Building upon our assets of historic architecture, successful festivals, centralized governmental, community, financial, and professional services, the IDP sees the strength of downtown as key to preserving quality of life throughout the county.

More than a matter of generating tax revenues to pay for services, an active, dense downtown will make the city's neighborhoods more attractive places to live, thereby reducing the threat of rural sprawl that has begun to absorb agricultural land and intensify the demand for infrastructure and services in the surrounding towns (ibid). The downtown community is actively working to evolve their own markets to be less affected by the addition of the large franchises along the Rt. 13 corridor, which have begun to siphon off sales to local buyers. Ironically, a recent marketing study showed that downtown is the primary destination for our tourists because it is so different from the "big boxes" back home (Gary Ferguson, Ithaca Downtown Partnership, pers. comm.). Expanding the presence and involvement of Cornell University and Ithaca College in downtown would go far to offset the competitive effects of strip commercial development on economic activity in the downtown (ibid).

Planners with the City of Ithaca, IDP, and Tompkins County have all closed in upon similar visions for future development that emphasize “smart growth” infrastructure design principles and new levels of intermunicipal cooperation (Planning/Environmental Research Consultants, 1998; Ferguson, 2004; Tompkins County Planning Department, 2003). Over the past decade, the amount of land converted from natural cover or farmland has far outpaced the demand due to our modest population growth rate. This type of “sprawl” threatens many of the characteristics that citizens value about our county. The Tompkins County Planning Department spent 18 months asking local residents about how they would prefer to see future growth in Tompkins County. The result is found in the Vital Communities Initiative Principles, derived from the combined visions of community members (Tompkins County Planning Department, 2001, 2002).

These seven design principles reflect a very informed populace that wants to replace the negative trends resulting from development and transportation patterns established in the 1950s. Instead, we want to:

- Build strong, cohesive neighborhoods and communities
- Encourage nodal development patterns that build on existing infrastructure and population centers
- Promote choice and affordability in housing options
- Protect natural resources, green spaces, and recreational resources
- Promote agriculture, protect farmland, and protect the rural economy
- Enhance development of a local economy that supports strong communities
- Promote a multi-modal transportation system that encourages economic health and community vitality

Most of these principles point to land use choices as the determinants of much of our quality of life. In New York, land use regulation occurs at the smallest unit of government in our towns, villages, and cities; yet those local decisions have large impacts outside individual municipal boundaries by determining things such as traffic patterns and overall demand for services. Doubtless we have many hours of discussion ahead before we might come to any intermunicipal, county-wide agreements around sharing both tax revenues and the cost of services in Tompkins County; but many residents seem to realize that may be our best option for both saving money and getting the kind of communities we want to live in. As the county begins work on its comprehensive plan, municipal officials will need to keep our shared vision in mind.

Perhaps transportation is the sector that would most benefit from coordinated land use decision-making, which could concentrate development in a way that reduces reliance on private cars, and perhaps save money in the long run. We are projected to spend about \$47 million per year on transportation in Tompkins County over the next two decades to try and address our poor road conditions, traffic congestion, and need for additional alternative modes of transport (de Aragon, pers. comm., 2002; City of Ithaca, 2001; Fehr & Peers Associates, 2000).

The public has consistently voiced the desire for safe ways to bicycle or walk, whether to get to work or run errands, or for much-needed exercise in our sedentary lives (Tompkins County Quality of Life Committee, 2002). Some progress on meeting demand for bicycling and walking trails in the county has recently been made, with additions and extensions to the Cayuga Waterfront, East Hill, South Hill, and

Dryden Lake trails planned. It's been a slow process, with almost ten years since the Tompkins County Greenway Coalition published their detailed plan for a network of trails and biological corridors in the county (1995), and several years over which the City of Ithaca has struggled with acceptance of their "Ithaca Bicycle Plan" (City of Ithaca, 1994b; City of Ithaca, 1997). Our Ithaca-Tompkins County Transportation Council (1999) has completed a trail corridor study and urges local municipalities to accept their offer of technical assistance in developing and implementing plans for multi-use trails in their jurisdictions. A coordinated network could further increase our impressive figure of 17.5% of work trips made by bicycling and walking (U.S. average is 3.3%) (U.S. 2000 Census), allowing us to reduce traffic congestion even further while improving community health.

Making Ends Meet

Perhaps the most intensively examined of the critical issues identified in the Compass II survey is the shortage of affordable housing. The key informant group ranked it as the second highest priority and over half of the households said it was critical, while more than a third said substandard housing was a severe problem (Horn, 2003). Our local statistics back up this sense of urgency. A "rule of thumb" for personal budgets is that shelter (rent or mortgage plus utilities) should not exceed 30% of one's income. The 2000 census showed that 40% of households in Tompkins County are cost burdened by this measure, with over 20% of households spending over 50% of their income on shelter alone. This situation is most acute for renters with over 50% being "overburdened" by housing costs compared to 22% of homeowners (Horn, 2003).

Substantial effort has gone into understanding the structure of the housing shortage and very detailed studies are available (Armstrong et al, 2004; Mazzarella, 2004; CRP 558 Housing Workshop, 2003a; CRP 558 Housing Workshop, 2003b). One of the primary factors is the large number of student renters in our community who compete for housing with local residents, thereby driving up rents. Tompkins has the highest median rents in the region, and the highest median home purchase price as well (Armstrong et al, 2004). The median purchase price of \$134,000 in 2002 was 49% higher than that in Tioga County and 78% higher than that in Cortland County (Mazzarella, 2004). Prices have escalated sharply in the last few years as competition between all income levels for the few single-family houses on the market has created a seller's market with stories of bidding wars for houses in desirable neighborhoods. Doubtless, the high price of housing has been a factor in the increased numbers of in-commuters to Tompkins County who now fill nearly 30% of county jobs (Armstrong et al, 2004) and add to the traffic congestion of our roads.

In general, our housing stock is aging, home ownership is declining, and not enough affordable housing is being built. Only 26% of houses are owner-occupied within the City of Ithaca, compared to national averages of 66%, with most remaining owners elderly, single women, and low-income people (Mazzarella, 2004). Zoning regulations and inadequate infrastructure are part of the reason for the lack of new affordable housing construction, especially in the rural towns (CRP 558, 2003b). But even more influential are the fearful myths about affordable housing that have led residents in Groton, Dryden, and Trumansburg to protest construction of multi-family complexes (Horn, 2003; CRP 558, 2003b). At a recent "Critical Issues Roundtable on Housing" hosted by the local Community Foundation and the Chamber of Commerce, over 125 attendees identified the need for a public education campaign to overcome negative perceptions and anti-development sentiments that have made it difficult to provide

decent housing for those in need. Roundtable participants also noted the need for modifications of zoning regulations and more intermunicipal cooperation to make sure affordable housing is available in all parts of the county (Community Foundation of Tompkins County and Tompkins County Chamber of Commerce, 2004).

Senior citizens and disabled citizens were noted as two of the more “at risk” groups in our housing market. They tend to be on fixed incomes, and the rise in rents and property taxes has been more burdensome for them. Fortunately, we have many federal, state, and local programs to assist low-income residents. Better Housing for Tompkins County, Ithaca Housing Authority, Ithaca Neighborhood Housing Services, and Tompkins Community Action are very active, but they do not have the resources to deal with the problems caused by prejudice against affordable housing. As a result, more people are slipping into homelessness with the number of bednights provided by Red Cross increasing 58% in the past few years, and demand exceeding capacity by 239% in 2002 for beds in the county shelter system (CRP 558, 2003b). Much of this increase was due to chronic homelessness, indicating a lack of transitional housing or permanent housing solutions (Dill, 2003).

A significant portion of the homeless are young people, with more arriving in the summer months. Many of these youth were found to be ill (ibid). For a few, their wandering may be by choice, as some still have options for housing (Kathy Schlather, Dept. Social Services, pers. comm.) There are probably many causes behind the phenomena of uprooted teens. One factor may be the rise in domestic violence reported by Sheriff Peter Meskill (pers. comm.). Another may be related to the rise in cases of neglect seen in Family Courts (Tompkins County Health Department, 1998). The Compass II survey found that 30% of households reported stress, depression, or anxiety as a critical problem in their homes, with 20% reporting behavior or emotional problems in their children (Horn, 2003). The changes in welfare rules have also increased household stress, which may force teens with few job skills onto the streets.

Young families just beginning their working careers are also impacted by the lack of affordable child care, adding to their difficulties with affordable housing. Surveys by Compass II and the Day Care and Child Development Council (DCCDC) of Tompkins County both found about 22% of respondents reporting having trouble affording care (Horn, 2003). There are some subsidies available, but they are not well used. Recently, the DCCDC has created an alliance with the Chamber of Commerce, Department of Social Services, local businesses and foundations, and Cornell and Ithaca College to form the Early Education Partnership which will create a community fund offering universal assistance to county families (Horn, 2003; Chamber of Commerce, 2002). Even though wages for child-care workers are very low, households at the median level of income would have to pay 20% of their entire income to have just one child enrolled in one of the local daycare centers (Horn, 2003).

Affordable health care is a growing concern for low and middle-income residents. However, *availability* of primary and specialty care is not a problem in Tompkins County. We are well supplied with both practitioners and state-of-the-art technologies (Horn, 2003). We have several key facilities and programs to help with health care issues such as Cayuga Medical Center, Health Planning Council, Gerontology Institute at Ithaca College, Office of the Aging, Department of Health, and the Department of Social Services (though confusion over health plans and subsidized care decreases our effective utilization of available programs). We are doing well in that the percent of uninsured individuals is lower in Tompkins

County (10%) than elsewhere in NYS (15.5%) (Horn, 2003); and we even have our own local Ithaca Health Fund to provide affordable coverage for emergency and some routine health care.

Like most Americans, our problem is with affording both our personal health care and the collective health needs covered by Medicare and Medicaid. The working poor and self-employed are especially constrained in finding affordable coverage. Lack of preventative care for these individuals tends to result in higher, long-term costs to the individual and society. Medicaid costs are the primary cause of the increases in the budget for the Department of Social Services in the last few years as health care costs have increased and new programs have been added (Kathy Schlather, Dept. Social Services, pers. comm.). The local share of the DSS budget for 2004 is projected to increase to 43% primarily due to Medicaid cost increases (ibid).

Even more worrisome is the projected expense of providing Medicare benefits. By 2015, 20% of New York's population will be over 60 years old (New York State Office of the Aging, 2000). Payments per Medicare enrollee have increased from \$583 in 1975 to \$4819 in 1995, with projections for around \$10,000 per person per year in 2005 (Tompkins County Office for the Aging, 1999). Paying for subsidized health care is difficult now; it isn't clear how we will afford it when the senior population has doubled and the age classes still working (and paying taxes) have shrunk even further.

Only 5% of Medicare beneficiaries account for 45% of Medicare spending (Tompkins County Office for the Aging, 1999). It seems counterintuitive, but this extreme investment in the health care of a few might be addressed by expanding the services that Medicare covers to include the kind of preventative, health maintenance interventions that can keep seniors from developing acute conditions (ibid). It is also clear that much more aggressive campaigns focused on the underlying causes of disease are necessary to stop our financial hemorrhaging. The top three underlying causes of death in New York State are tobacco, diet and exercise, and alcohol – almost 40% of deaths in the state are due to lifestyle choices (Public Health Priorities Committee, 1996). We have an array of public health programs in Tompkins County administered by the Department of Health, Department of Social Services, Office of the Aging, and the Health Planning Council that specifically try to support citizens in making healthier choices, but budget cuts have created severe staff shortages and many proactive programming efforts have been curtailed (Tompkins County Health Department, 2002; Alice Cole, Health Department, pers. comm.; Irene Stein, Office for the Aging, pers. comm.; Betty Falcao, Health Planning Council, pers. comm.; Kathy Schlather, Department Social Services, pers. comm.).

Recent national headlines reported that poor diet and lack of exercise were now the leading cause of death in the United States. One physician interviewed on the radio said that all of our gains through improved medical technologies may soon be canceled out by the increased mortality from this one factor. Over 10% of U.S. health care costs are due to obesity, and 25% of Medicare costs are related to diabetes (Wilkinson et al, 2002). Much of this is caused by the Western diet, influenced by a "cheap food" policy and subsidized corn production, along with cultural norms that tend to "supersize" serving portions of high-calorie foods. But we have also "engineered an epidemic of obesity" (ibid) as we have designed communities around driving our cars to our sedentary jobs, where we spend ever increasing hours to meet demands for increased productivity. All of this is rapidly coming home in the form of diabetes and heart disease, and very large medical bills.

Most of the necessary lifestyle changes must take place at the individual level; but people need the support of their communities at work and at home to accomplish the necessary transitions to healthier lives. It will require a profound shift in design criteria in both neighborhoods and worksites to provide citizens with the kind of easily accessed and enjoyable physical activities that guard health. And communities may need to innovate with urban gardens, farmers markets, and community supported agriculture to help change people's relationship to their food. Investments in new infrastructure for health maintenance will quite likely be cost effective compared to the projected medical costs of too many unfit, aging baby boomers.

Living in the Land of Plenty

We have some very difficult issues to understand and solve. A great deal of collective wisdom will be needed to address our problems around economic stability and social well being. However, we can count ourselves well ahead of many American communities in terms of ecological integrity. We are very aware of the creeping sprawl in parts of the county, but only about 9% of land in Tompkins County had been developed by 2000 (Tompkins County Quality of Life Committee, 2002). Over 60% of the county is in natural cover, with a third of that given permanent protection in state forests, parks, and nature preserves (ibid). Another 30% is in farmland which produces over a million dollars of food products that are sold directly to consumers for human consumption (Cornell Cooperative Extension, 2004).

We have learned to be more careful about conserving our natural resources. Programs to provide permanent protection to farmland are underway in various parts of the county. We are the only upstate county to have a comprehensive inventory of our "unique natural areas" which may be used by every municipality to guide development decisions (Tompkins County Environmental Management Council, 2000). Public opinion polls show a concern over sprawl development and a desire to preserve open space, clean water and clean air (Tompkins County Quality of Life Committee, 2002). Well-supported community groups like the Finger Lakes Land Trust, Cayuga Watershed Network, Cayuga Nature Center, Cayuga Bird Club, and Tompkins County Environmental Management Council provide both education and oversight for our natural resources.

Water, cropland, and forests. Tompkins County has a healthy supply of all three, as well as the potential for a variety of renewable energy sources such as wind, solar, and biomass. Food, energy, and shelter from our own landscape can be indefinitely provided so long as we continue and improve upon our good stewardship of the county, and design our communities to exist ever more lightly upon the land. Our objective is not a grand isolation from the rest of the world; but rather a responsible and harmonious engagement with each other and the fundamentals of our existence.

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