

Comments on Draft Comprehensive Plan

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As a resident of Dryden for 34 years, I appreciate the opportunity to comment on the Draft Comprehensive Plan. For context, I represented the western half of the Town on the Tompkins County Legislature from 2002 – 2022, during which time I chaired the Legislature for six years, and was chair of various committees on housing, the environment, and economic development over the years. I also chaired the Community Housing Development Fund for the past eight years, so I approach the Housing section of the draft plan with some level of expertise.

My first comment is, admittedly, superficial – about the photographs in the document. Until page 43, every single picture is of a rural landscape, with the modest exception of page 21, which shows an apartment building off in the distance. Where are the pictures of our vibrant communities? Our villages and hamlets, our diverse housing stock? What about Southworth Library, Montgomery Park, the Varna Community Association, Houtz Hall in Etna, TC3, the Ellis Hollow Community Center, or Dryden Dairy Days? On the later pages, there are shots of the built environment, but when I got to the Vision Statement (p. 36), I was hard-pressed to see how Dryden was “COMMITTED TO SUSTAINABLE AND INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT” at all. The overwhelming impression to that point (and beyond) is of an agricultural town that wants to stay that way. In your final version, please, please correct this imbalance.

Comments on Section 1, “Rural Roots: Housing and Affordability”

General comment: I agree with the overall goals and “Community Concerns,” but the statement that “...the town is continuing to experience residential growth” may be subject to question. The 2020 census showed that the Town lost 530 residents since the previous census! While this may well be an undercount (based on TC3 students leaving town during the pandemic lockdown), it is a concern and this plan should mention it. I believe a significant loss of permanent residents may be due to housing units being converted to short-term rentals (STR). This Plan should address this issue. The data about how many units went to STR should be available from Nick Helmholdt in the Tompkins County Department of Planning and Sustainability.

Overall, the approach of “densification” is key to increasing housing availability, diversity, and affordability. A 2010 study of infrastructure in the county by Ithaca Area Economic Development found that existing water and sewer infrastructure could accommodate many more housing units than were being served at the time. That study is currently being updated and its results should be used for Dryden’s planning efforts (<https://ithacaareaed.org/initiatives/>).

Housing “diversity” should include different vehicles for home ownership, including condominiums, homeowners associations, and “Resident Owned Communities” as developed by PathStone Corporation out of Rochester (<https://pathstone.org/>). They have a model for affordable, equitable ownership of manufactured home communities that Dryden absolutely should pursue.

P. 46: I have a problem with this sentence: “With a limited amount of land zoned for commercial use and higher-density residential development like apartments, the need for nodal development within the town is reinforced by the current tax environment.” We should be advocating for denser nodal development – including more commercial use and higher-density residential – because it’s good for

sustainability, preservation of farmland and open spaces, walkability and transit-efficiency, and community life. Tax revenues are a happy co-result of this type of resource-efficient land use.

P. 48: "ACTION RR 1.1.4 Review zoning districts to encourage commercial growth within the Dryden School District to balance the tax assessment between commercial and residential properties." The "nodes" that might be appropriate for commercial development are the Villages, plus the NYSEG area and Varna. In other words, within the Dryden School District, the Villages and their immediate surrounds are really the only appropriate option. We should not be encouraging commercial growth to sprawl into agricultural areas.

P. 49: "GOAL RR 2 – SUPPORT INVESTMENT IN EXISTING HOUSING STOCK

There are a range of housing conditions within the town; there is a general concern that housing conditions are deteriorating. The town SHOULD (not "could") continue to investigate programs available to homeowners interested in making improvements to their homes." PLEASE ADD: "and to landlords willing to improve their properties (although any public subsidy should be tied to maintaining current tenants rather than raising rents)."

P. 116-119: NODAL CORRIDOR

A "corridor" is not a node! A node is typically considered an area that is walkable, that is, with a radius of about a quarter-to-a-half mile. Looking at the map (p. 111), it's confusing and hard to figure out exactly where you're proposing this idea. Generally, I'd agree with the western-most area (It looks like Varna through NYSEG.) but not the strip along 366 toward Freeville. That will only encourage more driving, not more walking!