Lewis County is a quiet, rural-agricultural region within the portion of New York known as the North Country. The county is located within three major geographic regions: the Tug Hill Plateau, the Black River Valley, and the Adirondack Foothills. Each of these geographies has significantly influenced the development patterns and economies within the county. The fertile Black River Valley promotes high quality lands for crop production and grazing, while the hilly and steep terrain of the plateau and mountains limit these areas to forestry. As a result, the largest industries within the county’s 26 municipalities are dairy farming and timber/wood products. The rugged terrain and often extreme North Country climatic conditions have limited development potential within the county, resulting in a small and scattered population of approximately 26,000 residents across nearly 1,300 square miles.

Although populations are spread throughout the county, municipalities are dealing with common issues, such as the loss of farmland and forestland, a stagnant economy, declining population, and aging infrastructure. Chapter 2 includes further information on Existing Conditions. County municipalities are also facing issues of increasing tourism and an expanding market for seasonal properties. None of these issues are constrained by municipal boundaries, with impacts, both positive and negative, distributed across the county.

THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN: COUNTY LEVEL POLICY, LOCAL GUIDANCE

Lewis County recognizes the need for a comprehensive and strategic approach to the complex issues faced in the 21st Century. This collection of small towns and villages needs to be able to effectively leverage its assets and overcome challenges in order to continuously improve the quality of life of its citizens. This County Comprehensive Plan is designed to play a foundational role in that effort over the next 10 to 15 years. The Plan provides an overall framework for future public and private investment and decision making in the county. Investment can take many forms, such as, but not limited to, financial, civic, and creative resources. It is this collective investment by residents, businesses, institutions, churches, volunteer organizations, and county and local government that will shape the physical, social, and economic character of the community. The Plan articulates an overall vision for the county and the means to achieve the objectives set forth.

This Plan will function at two levels. First, upon adoption it will become the primary policy document for Lewis County government that provides a path forward on a host of issues critical to the future of the region, the most significant being the utilization and deployment of resources. County level policies, which are outlined in detail in Chapter 3, are relatively broad statements that provide a framework for the future of Lewis County. This Comprehensive Plan provides a necessary level of continuity and consistency to assist county officials and staff in working towards common objectives on topics such as tourism, recreation, economic development, infrastructure and regional coordination, among others. At the county level, future decisions and investments shall be in accordance with this document, as it is the adopted policy of Lewis County. Furthermore, by state law, all plans for capital projects at the local, county, and state level shall take the contents of this Plan into consideration prior to action or implementation.

The second functional level of this Plan is the provision of guidance and recommendations on issues common to all communities. Plan policies provide recommendations on opportunities for county municipalities to work together in leveraging resources, learning from each other, and solving problems collectively. This Plan uncovers opportunities seldom discussed at the individual town or village level for intermunicipal cooperation or the leveraging of common resources.

This Plan is not a regulatory document at the local level; Lewis County does not have the authority to impose policies presented in this Plan upon county municipalities beyond the jurisdictional areas it currently enforces, such as County highways. County municipalities are not required to approve or adopt this Comprehensive Plan. However, significant effort was taken to provide a level of continuity across the county, especially within the County Character Area Plan (see Chapter 4). This portion of the document has the greatest impact on linking together the County’s 26 municipalities under a common framework. The County Character Area Plan provides recommendations and guidance on land use issues to towns and villages; yet, it does not provide regulations that are enforceable at the county level. However, the towns and villages can utilize this Plan as a starting point in their own discussions regarding the future of their communities, as they work to make Lewis County the premier rural county in New York State.

The Comprehensive Plan, Defined

The process for and the contents of the Plan are consistent with New York State General Municipal Law (GML) 239-d, which states the following:

The county comprehensive plan may include but shall not be limited to the following topics at the level of detail adapted to the special requirements of the county:

(a) General statements of goals, objectives, principles, policies, and standards upon which proposals for the immediate and long-range protection, enhancement, growth, and development of the county are based;
(b) Consideration of regional needs and the official plans of other governmental units and agencies within the county;
(c) The existing and proposed location and intensity of land uses;
(d) Consideration of agricultural uses, historic and cultural resources, coastal and natural and scenic resources and sensitive environmental areas;
(e) Consideration of population, demographic and socio-economic trends and future projections;
(f) The location and types of transportation facilities, including the reuse of abandoned transportation facilities;
(g) Existing and proposed general location of public and private utilities and infrastructure;
(h) Existing housing resources and future housing needs, including affordable housing;
(i) The present and future general location of educational and cultural facilities, historic sites, health facilities, and facilities for emergency services;
(j) Existing and proposed recreation facilities and parkland;
(k) The present and potential future general location of commercial and industrial facilities;
(l) Specific policies and strategies for improving the county economy in coordination with other plan topics;
(m) Proposed measures, programs, devices, and instruments to implement the goals and objectives of the various topics within the county comprehensive plan;
(n) All or part of the plan of another public agency;
(o) Any and all other items which are consistent with the protection, enhancement, orderly growth and development of the county; and
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Lewis County and clear objectives, and to eliminate ad hoc projects and assure that a comprehensive plan as a favorable, and sometimes required, condition for the sake of the health, welfare, and general prosperity of its citizens. Therefore, many state agencies recognize the existence of a comprehensive plan must be adopted by the county legislative body following a public hearing. The approval process, however, does not preclude future review or amendments. The vision and policies contained in the Plan should be perceived as flexible. As the conditions upon which the document is based change, it is reasonable to assume that its contents may need to be changed as well. According to GML 239-d, a county comprehensive plan must establish the interval of periodic review of the document. It is recommended that this Plan serve as a guide for the next 10 to 15 years. However, the Plan should be reviewed, at most, every seven years to gauge progress on implementation and perform needed maintenance. A revision should include an update to relevant existing conditions data, verification of stated vision and policies, a summary of completed action items and those underway, and the addition of other relevant implementation steps based on the changing needs of the County. A more formal revision should occur at the end of the 15-year planning period.

Key Points

- Comprehensive Plans develop a cohesive and coordinated set of policies and goals that assist decision making and investment.
- Future capital investments at the local, county and state level must be reviewed for consistency with the County Comprehensive Plan.
- The County Comprehensive Plan is not regulatory at the local level, yet provides guidance and recommendations on numerous important topics.
- Comprehensive Plans are required in order to qualify for some grant and funding sources at the state and federal level.
- Planning and policy recommendations should be regularly reviewed and amended, as needed, to remain relevant as conditions change.

It is the policy of New York State to encourage comprehensive planning for the sake of the health, welfare, and general prosperity of its citizens. Therefore, many state agencies recognize the existence of a comprehensive plan as a favorable, and sometimes required, condition for grants and other funding assistance for municipal projects. Funding agencies encourage municipalities to act in concert with a stated vision and clear objectives, and to eliminate ad hoc projects and assure that funds are spent in pursuit of a well-defined purpose. Ultimately, this Plan will likely improve the County’s level of success at procuring funding from multiple sources.

**PROCESS OVERVIEW**

The process for the Lewis County Comprehensive Plan was initiated to provide the community with an opportunity to participate in the creation of a plan that will guide the future of the region. As every good comprehensive plan should, this Plan builds upon the county’s strengths, addresses its weaknesses, capitalizes on opportunities and identifies the threats to the overall quality of life. The Plan accomplishes this by establishing a community vision and identifying policies, objectives and action items that address numerous issues related to improving the quality of life for residents.

In order to accurately develop the key components of the Plan, numerous and varied opportunities were provided for the public and interested stakeholders to participate in the process. These opportunities included public meetings, community workshops, stakeholder groups, focus groups, and steering committee meetings. This depth of input gathering was designed to capture multiple perspectives from business owners, local planning board members, recreation enthusiasts, industry experts, elected officials, regional authorities, and the general public. A summary of these participation opportunities follows.

**Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee**

In 2008, a Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee was convened and charged with the task of directing the planning consultants to develop the comprehensive plan in an efficient and effective manner to the greatest benefit of the community. As well, this Committee was charged with providing local perspectives on issues identified during the planning process. The Committee included representatives from businesses, local government, regional organizations, not-for-profits, and the community at large.

**Steering Committee Members**

- Renee Beyer, Chair
- Larry Dolhof
- Joe Farney
- Carl Galas
- Lee Hinkelman
- Brad Irons
- Frank House
- Matt Johnson
- Jennifer Karelus
- Michelle Ledoux
- Scott Mathys
- Anne Merrill
- Rick Porter
- Randy Schell
- Cheryl Shenkle-O’Neil
- Scott Steve
- Charles Sullivan
- Wayne White

Committee members represented diverse perspectives from within the county and served as an initial information source and sounding board for ideas and recommendations. Managed by the county’s Department of Economic Development and Planning, the group was involved with all aspects of the project, including identifying key issues to be addressed, facilitating public input, and continuous review of each of the Plan’s components. Over the course of 18 months, the group met over 10 times in addition to regular attendance at the various public meetings. The objective of these efforts was to solicit public input in order to build consensus around a vision for the county’s future.

**Stakeholder Meetings**

In May 2008, a series of stakeholder meetings were held to gain insight from agencies, departments, organizations, professionals, and volunteers dedicated to a specific purpose. Roundtable discussions with each of these bodies yielded valuable knowledge that was foundational to the development of a vision and series of objectives for the county. The following groups were met with as part of this series:

- Tug Hill Commission
- Agricultural Industry Experts
- ATV Associations
- Snowmobile Associations
- County Board of Legislators
- County Department of Economic Development and Planning
- County Industrial Development Agency
- Transportation and Highways

Notes from each of these meetings can be found in the Appendices.

**Municipal Meetings**

In June 2008, the project consultant and county staff met with each town and village in the county. In some cases towns and villages met in clusters, and in some cases individual meetings were held. The purpose of the meetings was to introduce the project to municipal officials and to request they stay involved with the Plan throughout its development. Additionally, there were extensive discussions regarding the greatest needs and challenges facing each local government, as well as ideas and opportunities that they felt should be examined as part of the Plan.

At the conclusion of this round of meetings, a series of key points and common themes were identified:

- Issue #1 - increases in cost of fuel and cost of living (creating municipal and personal challenges)
- Rural quality of life is valued, strong community pride and identity exist
Community Meetings
A series of three Community Workshops were held in August 2008 to introduce the public to the project. Attendants were given a presentation that summarized the Existing Conditions report as well as some key points that came out of meetings with municipal officials. A Visioning Exercise concluded the meetings, which allowed participants to submit their hopes, visions, or ideal characteristics related to priority issues such as the economy, tourism, infrastructure, agriculture, and forestry. Attendants were given the opportunity to read other people’s ideas and vote for their favorite submissions. This exercise was also performed with the Steering Committee, and the results of each are shown in Appendices.

Business Community Meetings
In August 2008, a focus group session with a group of Lewis County businesses was conducted, followed by a series of telephone interviews and in-person interviews with specific businesses. The goal was to identify priority issues facing the business community in the county. Interview questions were aimed at building on the work of previous planning documents, including the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). Interviews focused on key issues including tourism, alternative energy, workforce development and infrastructure improvements. The interviews were used to check in with businesses to see if new issues had developed since the CEDS was finalized in 2006.

Focus Group Meetings
In September 2008, planning consultants facilitated a series of nine Focus Group meetings, the topics of which were in part driven by the results of the aforementioned Visioning Exercise. Those meetings were held with representatives from the local communities as well as experts on relevant topics. They offered an in-depth discussion on the issues and opportunities associated with each particular topic, as shown below. The findings of these Focus Group meetings were utilized in the development of each policy area’s objectives and action items, as seen in Chapter 3, Vision & Implementation. Notes from each of the meetings can be found in the Appendices.

Focus Group Topics
- Dairy
- Forestry
- Tourism and Marketing
- Housing
- Real Property Assessment
- Regional Coordination and Government Operations
- Education
- Renewable and Sustainable Energy
- Weekend and Seasonal Residents

Community Workshops
A pair of community workshops dedicated to land use issues were held in April and June of 2009. The first workshop focused on the purpose and benefits of the County Comprehensive Plan, as well as a discussion of land use and zoning issues. A particular focus of the meeting was the inter-relationship between natural resources, the economy, and the overall quality of life of residents. Attendants were also introduced to a draft of the County Character Area Plan (CCAP, see Chapter 4). Break-out groups were held to discuss the CCAP, focusing on people’s desires and concerns for each land use type.

The second workshop summarized the key points that emerged from the first workshop. The meeting, which was largely attended by municipal officials and board members, also included a discussion of how the County Comprehensive Plan can be implemented at the local level, as well as the merits of developing a comprehensive plan at the town or village level.

Results from the Visioning Exercise at the Lewisville Community Meeting in August 2008

The business interviews yielded a number of positive insights about what the county can do to strengthen economic development moving forward. They also revealed common themes that could be addressed in the planning process. A summary of these meetings and interviews can be found in the Appendices.
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Public Hearings

Public Hearings on the Comprehensive Plan were held on August 3rd and October 6th, 2009. These meetings, required by New York State General Municipal Law, were more formal in nature and gave residents the opportunity to give comments on the Draft Plan in front of the Steering Committee and Board of Legislators.

PLAN COMPONENTS

The planning process was broken down into three distinct phases. The first phase examined existing information, data, and physical conditions throughout the county. The second phase takes the previous findings and utilizes additional information to develop policy recommendations. The third phase culminates the research and policy development through recommendations for the physical character of the county.

Existing Conditions (Chapter 2)

This section of the Plan includes an analysis of current information such as demographics, housing, economics, and education. An extensive collection of maps is included, showing natural features, transportation systems, and other conditions relevant to planning for the county’s future. This analysis provides the community with a better understanding of who they are today, which improves the ability to plan for the next 10 to 15 years.

Vision and Implementation (Chapter 3)

Utilizing the information collected from the existing conditions analysis, focus groups, and Steering Committee meetings, a vision was developed that provides an overall statement guiding the implementation of the Plan. In addition, policy statements were developed for each of the seven policy areas. Policy statements are typically broad in nature and form the framework for a variety of objectives. Several objectives were developed for the policy areas, followed by a series of strategies or action items which can be used to achieve each of the objectives. Action items were broken down into short-term, mid-term, long-term and ongoing time frames. Action items determined to be high priority were noted for special consideration by the county for implementation. This provides an additional level of guidance to community leaders as they seek to put the Plan into immediate action.

County Character Area Plan (Chapter 4)

The County Character Area Plan (CCAP) identifies areas of common character for nine types of land uses found throughout the county. Although primarily a delineation of existing land use patterns, the CCAP identifies areas recommended for future development, including residential, commercial, and mixed-use areas. It also provides guidance on issues relevant to each land use category, such as revitalizing Main Street or protecting farmland.

While significant or concentrated growth pressures are not being felt throughout Lewis County, change does occur over time, typically along the edges of existing developed areas. For example, the county is bisected by several state highways. Over the course of a few decades, much of these corridors have transitioned to a mix of residential and commercial uses while the rest has remained farmland and forestry. It is in these frequently changing transitional areas where opportunities exist for recommendations and guidance to preserve the existing rural-agricultural character, while allowing for growth and redevelopment to occur at an appropriate scale and form.

High Priority Guidebook (separate document)

The High Priority Guidebook is a quick-reference companion document that summarizes the vision, policy areas and high priority action items in the Comprehensive Plan, and identifies key areas where the concepts of the Plan can be used at the local level. This document will be of significant value to the individual municipalities within Lewis County, as it condenses the recommendations from the Comprehensive Plan into a more streamlined, user-friendly format.

COMMUNITY WORKSHOP

Community Workshop Part I in April 2009

A specific proposal to do something that relates directly to accomplishing an objective, which usually takes the form of a course, activity, project, or program.

Meetings: Meetings with county staff and elected officials to discuss the Comprehensive Plan and gain community input.

Review of current and past planning efforts, both at the county and local level.

The Comprehensive Plan should be reviewed and revised every seven years, per New York State General Municipal Law 23-G-174. The Plan should also include an update to ensure changing conditions data, certification of adopted vision and policies, a summary of completed action items and those ongoing, and the addition of other relevant implementation steps based on the changing needs of the county.