



POLICY AREA 4: COMMUNITY RESOURCES & HOUSING

Policy Statement

It is the policy of Lewis County to have community resources that enhance our quality of life and improve our economic standing. These resources include affordable and quality housing, community centers, parks, education, and public safety systems. We recognize that these components are intertwined and therefore must be approached holistically. The county will actively support agencies, municipalities, and individuals as they seek to enhance these resources. Such partnerships will ensure that future generations will continue our heritage of pride and investment in our communities.

Overview

Quality of life is a concept that weaves together many unique elements including the social, cultural, economic and physical attributes of a place. The relationship between these elements creates a unique community fabric that dictates the quality of life a resident will experience. A high quality of life is often associated with affordable housing, good schools, a prospering economy, access to recreation and entertainment, and a healthy environment. However, to many citizens, another critical factor in the perception of quality of life is the interaction of people with their surroundings, including people, places, the environment, organizations and institutions. For example, multi-use trails are not only a recreation amenity, but they also enhance the mental and physical well-being of residents. Trails and recreation resources enhance quality of life by providing public health and social benefits to communities. It is the balance of all these factors that shapes the quality of life for residents in a given community. In Lewis County, quality of life elements include the unique rural setting, the small town atmosphere in village and hamlet centers, the peaceful countryside, safe communities, and a connection to the surrounding natural environment.

Strengths

Despite the limited scale of community services, many residents are satisfied with the quality of life they enjoy in Lewis County. The county's numerous village and hamlet centers are the functional cores for daily life. These activity centers have a strong sense of place and are unique to their rural and agricultural surroundings. Village centers offer the county's greatest concentration of population, and as a result, are the locations of public infrastructure and other community services, such as schools, that improve the quality of life for village residents. Nearly all of these village centers have been spared from the impacts of urban renewal and suburban sprawl, and remain relatively intact and true to their

historic beginnings. The preservation and enhancement of these community centers should be a high priority for county and local policy makers.

The county's participation in the North Country HOME Consortium is a noteworthy strength, as this organization provides access to housing funding, resources, and capacity on a regional scale. This collaborative organization was created to access funding directly through the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), rather than indirectly through New York State. The consortium allows local control of federal housing funds earmarked for low- to moderate-income families. Pre-authorized not-for-profit organizations can access HUD funding directly through local channels rather than state or federal government agencies. Since 1993, the Consortium has allocated funds to assist nearly 14,000 housing units in a three-county region.

In addition to its participation in North Country HOME, Lewis County is serviced by the non-profit Snow Belt Housing Company. Formed in 1982 to promote the availability of decent, safe, and affordable housing to residents of Lewis County, Snow Belt Housing administers grants and loans for home improvement and purchase assistance, and provides grants to municipalities for community revitalization efforts. The presence of this organization is an asset to the provision of safe and affordable housing in Lewis County.

Other community resources strengths include, in no particular order:

- Excellent Schools
- Ample resources for farmers (agri-business infrastructure)
- High quality of life in villages – quiet, little or no crime, friendly people, community pride
- Responsive emergency services
- Section 8 Choice Housing Voucher Program and weatherization information
- Strong hospital and outreach clinic
- Ample youth activities
- Good libraries

Challenges

Although the county consists of small towns and rural areas, most of it is within less than an hour's drive of larger cities, including Watertown, Utica, Rome, and Syracuse. Therefore, most residents are familiar with the wealth of amenities and conveniences found in these cities and surrounding suburbs. One of the county's greatest challenges will be to

address the level of expectation that comes with that familiarity, but may not be consistent with the market realities of a sparsely populated county. These expectations must be addressed when it comes to the provision of community resources, including educational, recreational, commercial, and retail opportunities.

For example, most residents enjoy the variety of retail, dining, and service options near Watertown or Syracuse, and would prefer not to have to drive long distances to reach these businesses. While villages like Lowville and Croghan may provide many of the necessary day-to-day goods and services, they lack the size to attract multiple large retailers found in most suburban settings.

Recreational and educational resources are also high in demand, yet difficult to provide in an efficient and cost effective manner. Programmed recreational spaces such as ball fields, playgrounds, swimming pools, and hard courts are expensive to install, require maintenance, and represent operations obligations for municipalities. A noted strength in Lewis County is the provision of public libraries, youth recreation activities, and emergency response services. However, each of these require significant expenditures on the part of municipalities, and in turn, residents. In difficult economic times, with tightening municipal and household budgets compounded by rising energy costs, county residents will have to grapple with expectations related to the provision of these goods and services.

A significant challenge that will require action at both the public and private levels is the provision of safe and affordable housing. The county's housing stock is aging significantly, with nearly 40 percent of housing units constructed before 1940, and only 15 percent constructed since 1990. These figures suggest many homeowners are attempting to maintain older, less efficient homes in an area known for harsh winter weather. Predominant housing issues in Lewis County are affordability, weatherization and continued disinvestment due to prolonged periods of deferred maintenance. These issues are a direct result of an aging housing stock coupled with stagnating and declining income levels.

Recent US Census data from the 2005-2007 American Community Survey suggests that housing affordability in Lewis County declined from 2000 to 2007, with the affordability ratio increasing during this time period. A score of 2.0 is considered affordable, indicating that median home values are two times median income values; higher scores indicate a decline in affordability. It should be noted, however, that on a national scale, a score of 3.0 is considered the upper end of affordability. In 2000, the Lewis County median housing value was only 1.7 times the median household income. This increased in 2007 to median home values 2.1 times median income levels.



While affordability has changed, this data does not suggest that housing is out of reach for many families, yet affordability is trending in a negative direction. Several additional factors work to negatively impact housing affordability, including high energy costs, a long and intense winter heating season, a growing second-home market, and increasing property taxes. Relatively low income levels only act to compound these issues, making housing affordability an issue to be monitored within Lewis County.

Other community resources challenges include, in no particular order:

- Struggling village centers
- Limited, inequitable, and uncoordinated housing code enforcement
- Population that is generally resistant to change, even if for the better
- Lack of higher education facilities
- Large numbers of inefficient and non-compliant manufactured homes
- Educational and training programs in farming and industry lack the latest technologies and best practices
- Lack of emergency, special needs, and low-income housing options
- Rising housing costs affecting long-time residents and low- and middle-income households

Opportunities

Lewis County has significant opportunities to improve the quality of life for its residents through targeted investments in community resources and housing. Similar to the provision of infrastructure, investments should leverage existing assets. However, not all policies and actions need to focus solely on areas of dense populations. Investments should be aimed at improving the overall quality of life for all residents, in both village centers and rural areas, to maintain the diversity of lifestyles within the county.

Village Centers

While the labor force can be considered the economic engine of Lewis County, its hamlets and villages are the centers of county social and cultural fabric, and are an important community resource. The preservation and revitalization of the county’s population centers should be considered a primary objective. Revitalization efforts should include the encouragement of higher density residential development within the core areas to increase activity, foot traffic, and accessibility of consumers to markets.

One method of achieving increased activity and coordination within village centers is the development of a Business Improvement District. Business Improvement Districts (BID) are organizations formed to provide enhanced services to the benefit of all district members. BID members

Community Resources & Housing: Key Points

- Many residents express satisfaction with their quality of life within the county. Suggested improvements are centered on issues such as the character of “Main Streets” and the condition of dilapidated housing stock.
- County and local governments must face the sobering realities of economic uncertainty and rising energy prices. These challenges, coupled with the county’s low population and sparse settlement pattern, hinder the efficient provision of goods and services.
- Public schools have an opportunity to leverage their established presence in the community to provide enhanced career training for young people and adults.

pay an additional tax, with proceeds being utilized for services that benefit from economies of scale, such as advertising, streetscape improvements, security, and maintenance duties.

Several grant funding opportunities exist through various state agencies for the improvement of streetscapes, façade rehabilitation, and community revitalization strategies. Lewis County should support, promote, and train communities to take advantage of these sources of funds to reinvigorate the small town atmosphere and sense of place that make individual town and hamlet centers unique and viable places to live, work, and raise a family.

As village centers struggle to compete with larger commercial areas in the region, there are strategic steps that can be taken to restore their place in the county. A primary consideration should be given to overcoming present limitations for upper story residential redevelopment, including the requirement of on-site parking and restrictions on in-law apartments. Communities should consider the creation of public incentives for private investment in repairs and rehabilitations for long vacant village structures through the leveraging of grant resources such as the Restore NY program through the Empire State Development Corporation. The increased utilization of upper-story residential units within village centers offers a good opportunity to fill much needed voids in affordable housing close to services, while at the same time actively reinvigorating the community core.

The Lewis County General Hospital and Residential Health Care Facility has the opportunity to draw additional development into villages to meet expanding needs for assisted living environments. The county’s aging population and limited housing stock make this type of development an attractive partnership opportunity for the hospital and private industry. Opportunities for assisted living housing should be explored in the largest population centers within the county.

The entire country currently faces uncertain times related to the economy, employment, housing, and energy prices. It is difficult to predict the effects that these challenges will have on the various communities in Lewis County. One potential outcome, as noted by county residents and professional planners alike, is that cities and villages will experience a rebirth of sorts, as people return to more compact communities that require less driving and offer more services. This trend has been in place at observable levels in much larger cities since the mid-1990s, but as more of a cultural shift. Another potential outcome is that population densities will shift out of Lewis County to neighboring cities such as Watertown, Utica, and Rome. These migration trends may be amplified by employment and economic concerns, as well as the risk of increased energy prices. How this will play out in Lewis County remains to be seen, but there are steps that can be taken to prepare for and encourage revitalization of villages, with established communities such as Lowville, Croghan, and Lyons Falls possibly as the direct benefactors.

Education

Lewis County residents are extremely proud of their schools. When asked about the state of education in the county, participants in the development of this Plan repeatedly noted the quality of teachers and schools as well as the wealth of programs available to both students and adults. The schools have already established themselves as community centers that are well integrated into the daily activities of residents. Moving forward, the county should partner with public schools, municipalities, BOCES, businesses, and colleges and universities in the region to further integrate these assets into the community. Opportunities exist for leveraging the established presence of local schools to help boost the economy and meet additional education needs throughout the county. In particular, public schools should partner with local farms, BOCES, Cornell Cooperative Extension, and other agriculture-related organizations to better prepare young people for modern agricultural practices and business models.

As with most components of this Plan, the major challenge facing schools is financial in nature. Specifically, residents and administrators are concerned about the stability of state aid, which comprises roughly two-thirds of most school budgets. Districts are not prepared to absorb the potential loss of all or a portion of that aid. According to a panel of superintendents and other administrators, schools rarely decline requests

for additional programs and services, and thus offer a wide variety of options for adults as well as youth. While these are important to the community, a more pro-active role in preparing for financial uncertainty is highly recommended.

Actions recommended in this Plan are designed to increase efficiency and play a more strategic role in rebuilding the local economy. The county is not positioned to control the organization and operations of public schools, but it should encourage districts to explore opportunities for increased efficiency through consolidation or shared services.

Housing

The Snow Belt Housing Company cannot currently meet the housing needs of all county residents without assistance from Lewis County. While the duplication of services and efforts should be avoided, the county should investigate the provision of additional resources that would permit Snow Belt Housing to improve its efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery. As well, the county should take a lead role in identifying targeted locations for housing investment and assistance that will be leveraged by other revitalization initiatives. By undertaking a coordination and facilitation role, the county's responsibility should be to ensure that housing improvements and initiatives are a primary consideration in comprehensive community revitalization strategies.

Additional opportunities to provide assistance to Snow Belt Housing should be explored through support of the on-going county-wide Housing Task Force. This task force can assist with outlining a comprehensive housing strategy that deals with affordability, weatherization, rehabilitation, senior housing and assisted living facilities. This task force can also help determine a comprehensive approach to code enforcement that can be applied to all municipalities within Lewis County as a minimum standard practice.

Objectives and Measures

The following Objectives should provide guidance for county-level policy and decision making related to community resources and housing. Specific strategies, or Action Items, for each Objective are listed in a table on the next page.

Objective A: Restore villages as centers of commerce, community, and civic life.

Measures:

- Track percent change in vacancy rates in village centers
- Number of streetscape projects completed
- Track percent change in residential and commercial rents
- Number of façade projects completed and dollars invested
- Track funding obtained from community development grants
- Track percent change in population and housing units

Objective B: Enhance educational facilities and programs to better serve the needs of children and adults in the community.

Measures:

- Number of students in on-line/distance learning
- Number of apprenticeship positions filled
- Number of buses utilized during off-hours, and miles traveled
- Number of educational programs created and attendance

Objective C: Encourage the provision of safe, affordable, and diverse housing options for county residents.

Measures:

- Number of priority housing sites identified
- Number of affordable housing units created and/or rehabilitated
- Number of municipalities with In-law Apartment ordinances
- Number of senior housing units
- Dollars spent on code improvements and weatherization and number of homeowners assisted
- Number of emergency shelters
- Number of residents requiring home heating assistance



NY Route 812 bisects the core business district in the Village of Croghan.



The age of the County's housing stock, coupled with the regional climate, make weatherization and heating system improvements a difficult task.



COMMUNITY RESOURCES & HOUSING IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Objective A: Restore villages as centers of commerce, community, and civic life.

#	Action Item	Originating From or Consistent With*					Time Frame	High Priority	Potential Partners	Implementation		Notes
		Comp Plan	CEDS	Blue	Black	Maple				Funding Resources/Strategies	Completed	
1	Develop a listing of grant and funding resources, complete with contact information, recurring dates, and eligible activities for use by County municipalities to enhance streetscapes, facades, historic structures and other community assets. This should be followed up with regularly scheduled primers and 'how-to-apply' sessions in advance of funding due dates.	✓			✓	✓	Short-term	X	Villages, County Dept. of Economic Development and Planning , NYSDOS, NYSDOT, SHPO, Tug Hill Commission, NYS DHCR			
2	Improve and expand sidewalk networks in the villages.	✓					On-going	X	Village of Lowville, NYSDOT, County	Safe Routes to School, Transportation Enhancements Program (NYSDOT), local capital projects, CDBG Small Cities		Safe Routes to School, a federal reimbursement program, can be used in villages that have public schools present.
3	Encourage local governments to participate in the Certified Local Government Program, which supports historic preservation efforts.				✓	✓	On-going		Villages, SHPO	Apply for status with the State Office of Historic Preservation		Benefits include access to special grants, legal and technical assistance, and preservation training
4	Preserve remaining government services, agencies, and departments within the village core areas to retain a critical mass of services, businesses, employees, and local jobs.	✓					On-going		County legislators, villages			Future considerations for the relocation of existing services, agencies, or departments should offer villages as a primary consideration to enhance activity levels and support sustainable population centers.
5	Promote existing and encourage new special events such as farmers' markets and festivals to increase foot traffic and activity in the county's villages and hamlets.	✓				✓	On-going	X	Villages, merchant associations , chambers	NYS Dept of Ag & Markets		
6	Inventory brownfield/spill sites in villages that would be good candidates for remediation and redevelopment through state & federal funds.				✓	✓	Short-term		Villages, NYSDOS	NYS Brownfield Opportunity Area Program (BOA)		Environmental and economic benefits
7	Identify key sites and structures in village centers for rehabilitation and redevelopment including site/building condition and suitability for use/reuse; pursue funding these projects.	✓					Short-term	X	Villages, Empire State Development	Restore NY Program & Upstate Regional Blueprint Fund (ESD)		Rehabilitated structures or new buildings should be consistent with the historic village character. A mix of uses, including retail and services on the first floor and office and residences on upper floors, will add to the vibrancy of the village.
8	Investigate the potential formation of a Business Improvement District within villages.	✓					Long-term		Chambers, merchant associations , Tug Hill Commission			

* Key:
 Comp Plan = Lewis County Comprehensive Plan
 CEDS = Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, Project Priority List
 Blue = Blueway Trail Development Plan for the Black River
 Black = Black River Scenic Byway Corridor Management Plan
 Maple = Maple Traditions Scenic Byway Corridor Management Plan
 Potential partners in **bold** are lead entities



COMMUNITY RESOURCES & HOUSING IMPLEMENTATION PLAN, CONTINUED

Objective A (continued)

#	Action Item	Originating From or Consistent With*					Implementation				Notes	
		Comp Plan	CEDS	Blue	Black	Maple	Time Frame	High Priority	Potential Partners	Funding Resources/Strategies		Completed
9	Develop a sample set of village center design guidelines, addressing streetscapes design, architectural standards, signage, access management and site design. Encourage participation from all villages.	✓					Short-term		Villages, Tug Hill Commission , County Dept. of Economic Development and Planning, NYSCA	NYSCA grant for Architecture, Planning and Design, CDBG Small Cities		
10	Identify and redesign intersections or street segments where a lack of pedestrian safety and activity may be hindering the vibrancy of village centers.	✓					Long-term		Villages, NYSDOT, County Highway Dept.	Transportation Enhancements Program (NYSDOT), CDBG Small Cities, NYS DHCR Main Streets, Upstate Regional Blueprint Fund		
11	Continue to support façade improvement programs so commercial building owners can receive matching grants for renovations, consistent with context-sensitive design guidelines.	✓					Short-term	X	Villages, Lewis County Development Corporation, Chamber of Commerce, merchants associations, Snow Belt Housing Company	CDBG economic development grants, NYS OCR Main Street,		
12	Pursue redevelopment of the vacant Lowville Plaza, an important and underutilized site on the southern edge of the Village of Lowville.	✓					Short-term	X	Village of Lowville, Lewis County Development Corporation, County Department of Economic Development & Planning, ESDC	Restore NY (ESDC), Upstate Regional Blueprint Fund		The site's vacancy has an economic impact on the village and county. It affects the perception of visitors and residents, as it is located at an important village gateway.
13	Conduct an inventory of vacant or underutilized property within village centers for the purpose of redevelopment.	✓					On-going		Villages, County Economic Development and Planning, Snow Belt Housing, Tug Hill Commission			



COMMUNITY RESOURCES & HOUSING IMPLEMENTATION PLAN, CONTINUED

Objective B: Enhance educational facilities and programs to better serve the needs of children and adults in the community.

#	Action Item	Originating From or Consistent With*					Time Frame	High Priority	Potential Partners	Implementation		Notes
		Comp Plan	CEDS	Blue	Black	Maple				Funding Resources/Strategies	Completed	
1	Explore the potential for county agencies to offer support services at local schools. These services could be targeted to adults as well as children.	✓					On-going		County government, school districts	N/A		Additional county services, i.e. medical, social, emotional, at these locations will reinforce this idea, and in some cases can reduce travel times, number of household trips, and even the amount of time students are absent from school.
2	Work with BOCES and school districts to establish a job apprenticeship or shadowing program for 9th and 10th graders.	✓					On-going		BOCES, school districts			Will help to engage their interests and exploratory skills at an earlier age.
3	Work with BOCES to expand their internship and shadowing programs to include emerging businesses such as aqua farming, organic farming, nurseries/landscaping, biofuels, and other non-traditional agri-businesses or value-added products businesses.	✓					Short-term		BOCES, school districts, County Dept. of Economic Development and Planning, Cornell Cooperative Extension			Current internship and shadowing programs are largely student-driven. As these new business types emerge, teachers and administrators could take a more active role in promoting exciting new fields and products.
4	Strive to create partnerships with educational facilities to increase the availability of specialty and higher education opportunities within the county.	✓					On-going	X	County government, school districts, higher education facilities			Personal and professional development opportunity



COMMUNITY RESOURCES & HOUSING IMPLEMENTATION PLAN, CONTINUED

Objective C: Encourage the provision of safe, affordable, and diverse housing options for county residents.

[Note: assessment related issues are addressed in the Regional Coordination policy area.]

#	Action Item	Originating From or Consistent With*					Implementation					Notes
		Comp Plan	CEDS	Blue	Black	Maple	Time Frame	High Priority	Potential Partners	Funding Resources/Strategies	Completed	
1	Identify priority sites for development/redevelopment of affordable housing units. Priority should be given to existing buildings and infrastructure, such as buildings in a village core with upper story apartments.		✓				Short-term	X	Snow Belt Housing Company, County Office for the Aging, USDA Rural Development	USDA Rural Community Development Initiative funding, NYS DHCR		Snow Belt Housing has purchased two vacant, dilapidated buildings in the Village of Lowville that could provide 10 units of affordable housing. This effort should be supported, with similar efforts pursued.
2	Pursue grants for development/redevelopment of sites for affordable housing.	✓	✓				On-going		Snow Belt Housing Company, County Office for the Aging, USDA Rural Development	NYS DHCR, NYS OCR, DANC, USDA		
3	Encourage municipalities to develop strict code enforcement policies related to property maintenance, safety, and public health.	✓					Short-term		Local governments, Tug Hill Commission, NYSDOS			Work with Tug Hill Commission and NYSDOS on model code language and code enforcement training
4	Develop a biannual meeting with large and emerging businesses in the area to better understand the housing needs of new employees moving to the area.	✓					Medium-term		Snow Belt Housing Company, local businesses, County Dept. of Economic Development and Planning	N/A		
5	Investigate the demand for and opportunities to provide 'enriched' housing options for the elderly.	✓					Short-term	X	Snow Belt, Lewis County General Hospital, County Office for the Aging	NYS DHCR, HUD		Enriched housing is rental housing with associated housekeeping, cooking and other services
6	Through the development of model code language, encourage municipalities to permit the division of larger homes and buildings for in-law apartments, to promote affordable housing options for seniors, young adults, and small, low-income families.	✓					Medium-term		Snow Belt Housing, Local governments, Tug Hill Commission	N/A		In particular, in-law apartments found in villages help repopulate those communities, increasing the support for goods and services within walking distance.
7	Continue to utilize the resources available through membership in the North Country HOME Consortium to address housing rehabilitation needs.	✓					On-going		County, DANC, Snow Belt			The HOME Consortium is administered by the Development Authority of the North Country (DANC). County and local participation needs to be reauthorized every 3 years.
8	Continue to encourage the formation of public/private partnerships for the development and delivery of housing and rehabilitation programs.	✓					On-going		County, DANC, Snow Belt, Lewis County Opportunities	NYS DHCR		



COMMUNITY RESOURCES & HOUSING IMPLEMENTATION PLAN, CONTINUED

Objective C (continued)

#	Action Item	Originating From or Consistent With*					Time Frame	High Priority	Potential Partners	Implementation		Notes
		Comp Plan	CEDS	Blue	Black	Maple				Funding Resources/Strategies	Completed	
9	Investigate opportunities to expand and augment the provision of rehabilitation and weatherization programs through the NYS Division of Housing and Community Renewal's Weatherization Assistance Program.	✓					Short-term		DANC, NYS DHCR, Lewis County Opportunities	NYS DHCR's Weatherization Assistance Program, CDBG Small Cities		
10	Develop a resource that assists homeowners in determining the financial viability of home heating system conversions.	✓					Medium-term		Snow Belt, DANC, County			
11	Continue to work with the DEC regarding the use of woody biomass to heat residential structures.	✓					Short-term		County, DEC			
12	Investigate the need for emergency housing shelters and temporary and transitional housing, and assist stakeholders with the process of bringing those services to the area.	✓					Medium-term		Snow Belt, County, Lewis County Opportunities, Kindred Home, Points North Coalition	Homeless Housing Assistance Program, NYS DHCR		
13	Continue to support the Snow Belt Housing Company in its development and delivery of housing programs, including housing rehabilitation and first-time home buyers programs, and the efforts of the Housing Task Force.	✓					On-going	X	County, Snow Belt, Lewis County Opportunities			