

## Executive Summary

### Why Are We Planning for Green Infrastructure?

Saratoga County and its communities have invested in planning—and have reaped the rewards—from historic downtown revitalization in Saratoga Springs to economic development fostered by the county’s wastewater collection and treatment system to current initiatives toward creating the Luther Forest Technology Campus. By investing in highways, water systems, and the like; the “grey infrastructure,” county residents and businesses set the stage for the growth of income and employment. And, like our ancestors who set up our system of national and state parks, county residents and leaders recognize the importance of conservation of our natural and cultural resources. By protecting our working farmlands and natural resources now, we can ensure the character of the county, the sense of place, will be part of our economic prospect for current and future generations.

The county’s green infrastructure resources – its lakes, rivers, forests, farmlands, and historic resources – are in transition. As the county continues to grow, these resources face increasing pressure. In particular, areas in proximity to the Adirondack Northway, state highway corridors, farmlands and waterfronts are among the places facing growth pressure.

The county has enjoyed the benefits of abundant and healthy natural resources—“green infrastructure.” This green infrastructure is as important to our health and well being as our system of grey infrastructure. These green assets provide clean air and water. They maintain functioning natural systems that reduce the impacts of flooding and erosion and provide many other significant environmental benefits. They help to sustain important economic, scenic, historic and recreational landscapes that attract residents and visitors to live, work, shop and recreate in Saratoga County. And, most importantly, protecting green infrastructure helps to maintain the intrinsic values of the county’s highly-respected landscape for future generations.



*Clean water is an economic benefit of a healthy ecosystem.*

There is no better time to plan for green infrastructure in Saratoga County than now. The county is expected to grow by an additional 58,000 persons by 2040. Housing units will grow at a rate faster than population growth due to reductions in average household sizes. Farmland is projected to become increasingly fragmented and developed—an irreplaceable loss of resources and county character. This plan is intended to help address both of these kinds of concerns in a positive manner—supporting growth important to the economy and helping willing landowners keep the land open.

To date, there are approximately 43,000 acres of protected open space lands (county and state forests, parks, etc.) in the county (or about eight percent of the land area in the county). The majority of this acreage is in the Adirondacks. Hence, the part of the county facing the greatest development pressure is the part of the county with the least amount of protected open space.

Balancing and benefiting from this green infrastructure are the communities, neighborhoods and employment centers of the county. This plan recognizes the importance of the availability of affordable housing and employment opportunities and the need for thriving commerce and industry to make a sustainable place. This plan is an important step in maintaining the integrity of Saratoga County's green infrastructure system and the exceptional quality of life that sets Saratoga County apart from other regions.

## **What is the Green Infrastructure Plan for Saratoga County?**

The Green Infrastructure Plan for Saratoga County is a regional initiative to identify and safeguard valued community open space resources. The plan brings together the county's most important open space resources, including natural systems such as streams, wetlands and watersheds; working landscapes such as farms and managed forests; recreational and trail opportunities such as multi-use trails and fishing access; and cultural resources such as scenic and historic corridors.

Community members in the county have actively participated in the creation of this plan. The plan began with a set of regional workshops in several communities throughout the county, designed to identify shared values for resource protection and priorities. Many community members participated in these workshops and helped to create an open space vision for the future of Saratoga County. These workshops helped to set the stage toward the creation of the recommendations set forth in this plan. Hence, this is a plan built from the ground up.

The plan builds upon local conservation goals and efforts to create regional priorities. This plan advances the concept of "borderless communities" in Saratoga County. Green infrastructure resources, such as rivers, wetlands, and even farmlands, do not always follow local municipal borders. In fact, the resources and economics of the region are more often unifying and cohesive, rather than divisive and fragmented. Often, it makes sense for several communities to collaborate to conserve a regional resource such as a greenway or natural area. This plan helps to identify these regional resources and provides a framework for communities to work together, with county leadership, to achieve a common goal.

The plan is about growing partnerships. This plan for Saratoga County is more than a plan for county governmental action. This plan recognizes at its foundation that successful open space conservation projects are the work of dedicated individuals and organizations motivated toward a common vision. This plan illustrates that vision. It will be in the hands of many to turn the vision into reality.

The core strategy of this plan, then, is the concept of growing partnerships for conservation. So much has been accomplished towards this end, yet there is much more work to be done. To

accomplish the goals set forth in this Green Infrastructure Plan for Saratoga County, there will need to be continued expansion of participation and support from all corners; from land owners to the municipalities, and from nonprofits to the county, state, and federal agencies.

## What is the Vision for the Green Infrastructure?

The vision for the county’s green infrastructure network includes a system of unfragmented wildlife “hubs,” linked together by conservation greenways. It includes retention and conservation of core working landscapes of agriculture and forestry. It includes opportunities for people to connect to the land, through trails, parks and waterfront access. It includes celebration of the county’s cultural heritage and the integration of green infrastructure with tourism and economic development initiatives. And, lastly, it includes the balancing of settlement and “grey infrastructure” to sustain green infrastructure. The green infrastructure network includes five major components, which are illustrated and discussed at length in Chapter 4 of this plan:

### Farmland Core Areas

Large, unfragmented blocks of working farms and farmlands should be retained and conserved.

### Natural Systems Hubs

Areas of unfragmented forest, interconnected wetlands, and other habitat should be conserved and balanced with sustainable uses that maintain the resource value.

### Greenway Corridors and Trails

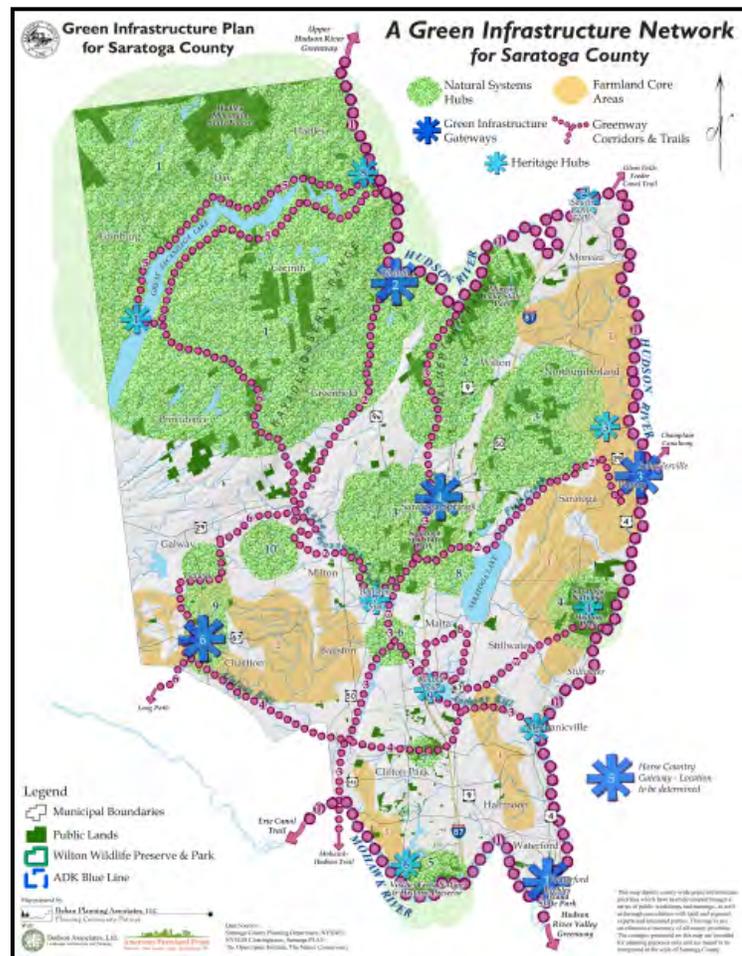
Connections between natural systems hubs, for both wildlife and people, should be created with sensitivity to the natural and cultural setting.

### Heritage Hubs

Concentrated areas of significant historic resources should be preserved and integrated into a heritage tourism network that celebrates the rich history of the county.

### Green Infrastructure Gateways

Major destinations and entrances to the county’s green infrastructure network should be celebrated and integrated with economic development and tourism efforts.



*This plan’s vision for an interconnected green infrastructure network is summarized in Chapter 4.*

## What are the Plan's Major Recommendations?

The plan recommends three major actions to be taken by the county to help advance green infrastructure planning and implementation:

### **I. EXPAND AND MODIFY THE EXISTING COUNTY FARMLAND/ OPEN SPACE GRANT PROGRAM**

The existing farmland/open space grant program should be modified as follows:

- Provide grants in all four categories of green infrastructure, including expansion of the types of farmland protection projects funded
- Provide grants for planning and implementation of county green infrastructure priorities
- Remove the per-project funding cap
- Increase the percentage of the county share on farmland protection projects
- Consider landowner contributions in the form of donations and bargain sales in project budget calculations for matching funds
- Increase the amount of funds to meet the growing demands of the program

Prioritize projects that:

- Are identified as priorities in this green infrastructure plan (see Chapter 4 summary and green infrastructure network map)
- Meet the guidelines for a county priority project

### **2. LINK GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE PLANNING WITH GREY INFRASTRUCTURE PLANNING**

- Continue to implement the policy of the county's development plan to guide infrastructure away from areas where intensive development is not appropriate
- Coordinate county public works projects, such as those planned for county highways and other corridors, with green infrastructure planning

### **3. HELP TO BUILD LOCAL CAPACITY FOR GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE BY CREATING A COUNTY GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM**

This program would provide assistance to county municipalities for green infrastructure planning and implementation, including:

- A geographic information systems (GIS) database that tracks existing and planned green infrastructure resources and projects
- A green infrastructure resource center that provides a central source for reports, model ordinances and practices, grant funding opportunities, and other innovative information
- Conferences, promotional materials and other educational efforts

## What Can I do to Help?

There is a role for everyone in building the green infrastructure network:

**Saratoga County** can play a significant role in helping communities, landowners, and others achieve the vision for the future through additional planning, administration, and project funding support, as discussed throughout this plan.

**State and Federal Agencies** will be able to more clearly see the county's vision for a green infrastructure network and will be able to deliver their programs more readily in response to local needs and opportunities.

**Landowners** are the heart of the green infrastructure plan. Those who have been stewards of the land for many years will be provided additional opportunities for farmland, open space, and natural resource conservation as this plan is implemented.

**Conservation Organizations** will be increasingly important partners in public education and advocacy and toward developing and stewarding projects.

**Cities, Towns and Villages** can use this plan to work together and with other partners to identify projects that meet the vision established herein as it fits their respective local vision and plans. This county plan highlights several opportunities for more detailed resource-specific planning and project identification, as well as potential increased funding opportunities.

**Development Community** members who have long supported smart growth measures that add to the quality of life and community amenities can continue to support and implement the concepts of conservation-based design for development.

## What is Included in This Plan?

The major focus of this plan has been to identify county green infrastructure resources and prioritize these resources for regional and local conservation and planning efforts. To this end, the plan and its products include the following major products:

### **A County-wide Green Infrastructure Database** (Chapter 3)

An extensive collection of data for green infrastructure resources in all of Saratoga County's municipalities. This database will be available to county municipalities to help direct their conservation and planning activities.

### **Theme-based Resource Inventory Maps** (Appendix A and Chapter 3)

A set of maps that synthesize the county's green infrastructure resources and concepts for four green infrastructure topic areas: natural systems; working landscapes; recreation and trails; and cultural landscapes.

### **County-wide Green Infrastructure Network Map** (Chapter 4)

A synthesized vision map for the county which helps to illustrate the interconnections between

green infrastructure resources.

**Recommendations and Strategies** (Chapters 5 and 6)

Detailed recommendations and strategies for Saratoga County to undertake to help achieve the vision and conservation goals of this plan.

**A Local Guide to the Plan** (Chapter 7)

A guide for local municipalities on how they can use, and build upon, this plan at the local level.

**Visualizing Conservation and Development in Saratoga County** (Appendix B)

An illustrated guidebook with real-world examples depicting how the goals of this plan can be accomplished at the local level using a menu of conservation and planning tools.

## What are the Next Steps?

This plan identifies three important strategic actions that Saratoga County can take to advance the recommendations and goals of this plan. The first step is to adopt this plan and distribute the materials within it to each municipality in the county. Maps and data created as part of this plan have already been used in local planning initiatives, and should continue to be updated and shared with green infrastructure partners.

This plan has identified short and long-term conservation goals and has illustrated the need for county assistance to help close the funding gap. An important action item of this plan is for the county to develop a long-term financing strategy for increasing green infrastructure funds at the county level. This financing strategy should analyze the goals of this plan, as well as existing funding sources, and quantify the need and realistic goals for filling this need.

Lastly, the county should retain the capacity needed to implement the green infrastructure plan's recommendations. This will likely include county designation of a green infrastructure "point person;" consultant assistance with detailed conservation planning, financing and project development; and expanded partnerships with land conservation organizations and others.

## Conclusion

With this plan begins a journey and a challenge to identify and prioritize a green infrastructure network in Saratoga County. It identifies a network that is composed of natural systems, working landscapes, trails and recreation opportunities, and cultural resources. It provides a comprehensive strategy for Saratoga County communities to continue to advance the conservation of the resources that form this network.

But this plan is just the beginning. The green infrastructure network is a long-term vision, with significant goals established for 5 to 20 years in the future. Completion of this plan is a significant accomplishment. Now there is both a vision and a database of the county's green infrastructure resources in place. There is a plan for the county, its municipalities, and community-based organizations to continue to increase their partnerships toward expanded conservation of these resources.

## Green Infrastructure Plan for Saratoga County

The plan has clearly illuminated the need for partnership from all levels – from federal, state, county, and local governments to private land conservation organizations, developers and landowners. The county is taking the lead in this partnership by completing this plan.

The journey will continue beyond this plan. Additional data will become available, and the plan database and maps will change. Future studies, for example on the county’s ecological framework, may help to shed some light on the existing resources and refine priorities within the network. This plan should be considered a working document; the next step down the journey to conserve and celebrate the green infrastructure network of Saratoga County.



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