

# Chapter I

## Introduction

### *Vision Statement*

***Niagara County is a world class destination;*** home to natural wonders including Niagara Falls, the Niagara River, the Niagara Escarpment and Gorge, and Lake Ontario; a community steeped in the celebration of its beauty, culture, and man-made heritage like the Erie Canalway; and a place to see and share with others.

***Niagara County is a center of national and international commerce;*** a place to locate and grow your business, find high quality employment, attend fine institutions of learning, learn a trade or hone your skills, and be part of a well-prepared and productive workforce.

***Niagara County is a community that values its rich natural resources;*** a community working together to protect and restore natural resources, conserve important wildlife habitat, clean up contaminated lands, and ensure that our gift to future generations is a sustainable environment.

***Niagara County is a great place to live and raise a family;*** a diverse community of historic cities, towns, and villages; from the uniqueness and vibrancy of our waterfront communities to the pastoral beauty and gentle lifestyles of our farming communities, Niagara County is a safe and healthy place to live, work, and play; a place of diverse housing choices, excellent schools, abundant recreation opportunities, and affordable living; and a community offering a high quality of life for all.

***Niagara County Communities 2008***

# Introduction

The Vision Statement expressed at the beginning of this Plan summarizes the great diversity and uniqueness of the natural and cultural resources that exist within Niagara County and that contribute so significantly to the quality of life of its communities. Just as important, the Vision Statement points to a number of overarching goals that are intended to enhance Niagara County's role as **a world class destination, a center of commerce, a model for sustainable environments, and a premier place to live.** These important themes were discussed throughout the planning process and form the foundation for many of the stated goals, objectives, strategies and recommendations of this Plan.

This Niagara Communities Comprehensive Plan 2030 is Niagara County's first comprehensive plan. The Plan is the result of nearly two years of stakeholder participation and public dialogue focused on identifying current issues and discovering opportunities to fulfill the Vision of the County. In recent years, Niagara County and many of its twenty municipalities have taken a proactive approach to planning for the future and a great deal of work has been accomplished by a variety of agencies, organizations, groups and individuals. However, additional work is needed in order to make the Vision for Niagara County a reality.

Like all planning tools this Comprehensive Plan is focused on the future of Niagara County. However, its value in providing countywide information as a snapshot of current conditions and trends across Niagara County in 2008 cannot be overstated. This document provides a compilation of information that is exclusive to Niagara County and its communities.

This information constitutes baseline data from which future progress on resolving issues can be measured.

Information contained within this Plan is provided in written and graphic formats. Much of this information has not been previously available to County residents, property owners, developers and public officials. For example, this Plan contains more than 100 countywide and topic-specific maps and supporting graphics utilizing Geographic Information Systems (GIS) data, analysis and mapping techniques. Information available in this comprehensive document can be referenced to facilitate dialogue and allow for more informed decision-making about future land use, public services and infrastructure needs within the County.

## Background

The Niagara Communities Comprehensive Plan has been created to provide a frame of reference for more informed decision-making at County levels based upon a more thorough knowledge of the existing conditions and future needs of Niagara County. This is particularly important as the County celebrates its Bicentennial in 2008. As its name implies, this Niagara Communities Comprehensive Plan is considered unique because it includes a considerable amount of information and input from local communities. County officials decided very early in the planning process that the Plan needs to reflect what is on the minds of residents living in communities throughout Niagara County.

This Plan reveals and documents some of the most pressing issues and concerns of County residents and other stakeholders. More importantly, however, this Plan represents the beginning of what needs to become an ongoing dialogue among communities, governments and stakeholders working collaboratively towards fulfillment of the vision for the County.

### *Niagara County*

*A World Class Destination*

*A Center of National and International Commerce*

*A Community that Values its Rich Natural Resources*

*A Great Place to Live and Raise a Family*

Preparation of this Plan began in 2006 when Niagara County officials sought funding assistance from New York State for its preparation. Funding assistance was secured in early 2007 from two State agencies: The New York State Department of State through the Quality Communities Grant Program, and the New York State Housing Trust Fund Corporation, Office of Community Renewal.

Clough, Harbour & Associates LLP was selected in mid-2007 as the County's planning consultant for the project. The County formed a Coordination Committee to oversee preparation of the Plan during the second half of 2007. The Coordination Committee included representatives of the County Legislature, County Manager, Commissioner of Economic Development, and County Planning. A Plan Steering Committee was also formed, which included representatives from each of the 20 municipalities of the County and the County's three Native American communities. Documentation of meetings held with the Plan Steering Committee, stakeholders and the public are provided in Plan Appendix A.

Recently, Niagara County and Erie County collaborated with numerous stakeholders in preparing the Erie-Niagara Counties Framework for Regional Growth to address regional issues and opportunities. The Framework was adopted in 2006 and laid the foundation for future planning initiatives by both counties including this Comprehensive Plan.

Niagara County has also been significantly involved in the Niagara River Greenway Plan and the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor Plan among other initiatives of regional importance. These and other initiatives are briefly summarized in Chapter II. These initiatives have regionwide perspectives that cross County boundaries in addressing specific issues, opportunities and resources. By contrast, up to now Niagara County has lacked a comprehensive approach to decision-making at the County level that explicitly addresses the interests and opportunities of all of the communities within its borders.

The need for a countywide comprehensive plan became increasingly evident over the years especially as these regional planning initiatives moved forward. Many issues and opportunities of countywide significance were identified by those initiatives, but as regional studies they could not address more locally specific topics regarding existing conditions, trends and the future needs of the communities in the County. Nevertheless, these initiatives helped to establish a need and build momentum for community-based dialogue supporting a more comprehensive approach to growth and development, County services, public infrastructure needs, resource protection and advancing opportunities for greater economic benefits derived from the area's rich natural and cultural resources.

This Plan builds upon other regional and local community planning initiatives, plans and studies. It provides discussion aimed at better understanding the complex role and interrelationships that land use, transportation, infrastructure, services and development decisions play in the County's overall quality of life. The planning process has brought stakeholders together to discuss and reach a better understanding of specific issues and important opportunities that exist in the County's urban, suburban and rural communities.

The Niagara Communities Comprehensive Plan identifies key issues on the minds of County residents and other stakeholders. As the planning process moved forward,

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*“Sprawl is defined as uncontrolled, low-density, fragmented, automobile-dependent development that rapidly spreads on the fringes of existing communities, often consuming agricultural and environmentally sensitive lands.”*

the complexity and interrelationships of many issues became increasingly obvious to those involved in the process. Issues and opportunities surfaced as a result of discussions that occurred during the process and many can potentially have a significant bearing on Niagara County’s future and the overall quality of life of its residents.

Population trends indicate that the population of Niagara County has been declining for some time, yet development patterns have been spreading northward and eastward farther and farther into the rural areas of the County. The continuation of these “sprawling” development patterns frequently results in the suburbanization of what were once completely rural areas. Sprawl has been identified as an important countywide issue. “Sprawl is defined as uncontrolled, low-density, fragmented, automobile-dependent development that rapidly spreads on the fringes of existing communities, often consuming agricultural and environmentally sensitive lands.” (League of Women Voters of Buffalo/Niagara. 2006).

Nationwide the consequences of haphazard development or sprawl have shown to include: the loss of prime farmland, unique farm soils, and the decline of widespread agriculture; encroachment and ultimate degradation or loss of natural systems that otherwise provide natural flood control, wildlife habitat, and protection of water quality and quantity; adverse effects on community aesthetics such as increased noise levels, visual impacts and loss of community character; and increased costs to taxpayers for providing expanded services such as new schools, fire protection and public infrastructure such as new roads, sewer and water systems. A multitude of studies, reports and publications are available that provide information on sprawl and the costs associated with it.

The Brookings Institution is among the many organizations that have studied the fiscal implications of sprawl as well as the benefits of Smart Growth development patterns on communities and regions. One such Brookings study summarizes these relationships between land use and fiscal welfare:

...rational use of more compact development patterns from 2000 to 2025 promise the following sorts of savings for governments nationwide: 11.8 percent, or \$110 billion, from 25-year road building costs; 6 percent, or \$12.6 billion, from 25-year water and sewer costs; and 3.7 percent, \$4 billion, for annual operations and service delivery. (The Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy. 2004)

Brookings (2004) also found that regional economic performance is enhanced and that suburbs benefit from Smart Growth development patterns and investment in “healthy urban cores”. Research by Brookings and others suggests that adoption of smart growth policies and practices could reduce capital expenditures for some state’s and localities in the range of 10 to 20 percent at a minimum.

As documented within this Plan, significant concerns have been expressed about the adverse effects of sprawl and unmanaged growth and development in Niagara County. Because these issues are complex and often cross municipal boundaries, the County is uniquely qualified to bring communities together to address these issues from a countywide perspective.

## Focus of this Plan

### – Communication, Collaboration and Connection

The planning process is focused on enhancing communication and collaboration within and among various communities and stakeholders across Niagara County in identifying and addressing topics of concern and interest. As such, this Plan serves as a tool to facilitate an ongoing communication process and collaborative efforts among all Niagara communities. The Plan also emphasizes the need to enhance connections among communities, physically as well as figuratively in order to promote a better understanding of countywide issues and opportunities.

The need for enhanced communication, collaboration and connection is emphasized throughout this document. By bringing stakeholders from communities across the County together to sit down and discuss their needs and those of their neighbors, the Niagara communities may be able to view short and long-term needs and goals from different perspectives.

This Plan also focuses on utilization of sound land use policies, such as implementation of “Smart Growth” principles on a countywide basis. Existing and future land use issues are discussed throughout the Plan accompanied by considerable mapped information, particularly in Chapters III, IV and V. These chapters also include information relative to present planning within Niagara County communities, some of which have up-to-date comprehensive plans that incorporate Smart Growth principles.

Each chapter of this Comprehensive Plan, whether devoted to economic development, County services and infrastructure, education, or public health and safety is tied in some way to the influences that past and future land use decisions have on residents and taxpayers in Niagara County. As land use evolves it affects virtually all other aspects of community life. In New York State land use decisions are largely the sole responsibility of local municipalities under the State’s Municipal Law, also referred to as “Home Rule”.

Municipal responsibility under “Home Rule” is discussed in Chapter II. It is important to note however, that what one municipality decides relative to land use, transportation and public infrastructure within its boundaries, through local comprehensive plans, zoning and other land use regulations, can have profound effects on determining land use patterns and the provision of infrastructure and services in adjoining municipalities and throughout the County. The County itself also influences land use by making decisions on where public infrastructure is developed and where services are provided.

As part of the planning process the County was divided into five planning subregions to facilitate discussion and the identification of commonalities and differences among the various areas of the County. Utilizing this subregional approach enabled discussion and analysis that considered future land use and how development patterns and trends may be altered to concentrate development to areas where it is most appropriate, thereby reducing the adverse effects of sprawl. In many cases these areas already have important infrastructure in place as well as the services needed to support future growth and development. The concentration of large-scale development in potentially suitable development and redevelopment areas in turn

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will help protect irreplaceable resources, such as prime farmlands, and control the cost to taxpayers related to the provision of public services and infrastructure by County and local governments.

Decisions relative to land use, although often made with the best of intentions, can sometimes result in unforeseen adverse cumulative impacts on the environment. For example, approvals of small scale projects that by themselves may seem relatively safe, but when considered as part of a larger development scenario can result in “leap frog” development patterns that fragment prime farmlands and adversely affect naturally functioning systems such as wetland complexes and floodplains. Therefore, this Plan considers future land use from a more countywide and subregional perspective to help guide future decisions and reduce the potential for adverse and cumulative impacts on communities and the environment.

## Organization of the Plan

This Comprehensive Plan (Plan) is organized into ten chapters and several appendices. Each chapter has been set up to address a particular area of interest and intended to function independent or nearly independent of other chapters. This format will allow information to be updated and revised as necessary in the future without the need to revise the entire Plan at any one time. The format also provides the user the ability to focus on those elements that may be of most interest.

### Phase I - Existing Conditions

This chapter, Chapter I, provides a brief introduction to the comprehensive planning process and general contents of the Plan. It is followed by three chapters prepared during Phase One of the planning process that focused on existing conditions within the County. This phase also identified previous planning initiatives and studies conducted within the general Niagara region, the County and its 20 municipalities.

Chapter II describes the overall planning process and justification for preparing the Comprehensive Plan. This chapter also provides discussion relative to the Plan’s purpose, need and the authority given to the County Legislature under provisions of NYS Municipal Law to undertake preparation of a comprehensive plan. State law allows counties to undertake comprehensive planning as a service to their residents and communities. Chapter II also summarizes numerous noteworthy planning initiatives and studies that have been undertaken in recent years by State, regional and local agencies, groups and organizations that have particular relevance to Niagara County and its communities.

Chapter III describes existing conditions within Niagara County as of 2008. This chapter provides a wealth of important information for use as benchmarks, so that future updates of the Comprehensive Plan can reflect back on these conditions in order to measure progress being made towards achieving stated goals and objectives under the five elements of the Plan.

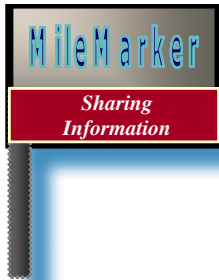
Chapter III introduces the several concepts as measurement tools to track progress of the Plan as it is implemented. These include the use of benchmarks, guideposts, milemarkers and milestones. Symbols representing these concepts have been placed in the sidebars throughout the document, to indicate that corresponding content is important to the Plan’s implementation.



**Benchmark** – This term and its associated symbol denote a specific situation, characteristic or condition that presently exists as a starting point from which measurements can be made much like a surveyor begins with a known benchmark from which all further measurements are taken. As an example, the percentage of a specific category of land use that currently exists within the County as identified in Chapter III is a benchmark value. These percentages, such as total farmland acreage in the County can be tracked to determine changes in agriculture over time.



**Guidepost** – This term and its associated symbol denote specific strategies that can be implemented to achieve certain outcomes. As a guidepost the strategy sets a direction for achieving a desired outcome, just as one might follow a guidepost to reach a destination. Using farmland protection as an example, one strategy to enhance agriculture includes adopting sustainable land use practices such as directing new development and public infrastructure to existing population centers in order to reduce pressure on rural agricultural lands.



**MileMarker** - This term and its associated symbol denote a measurement of progress in completing significant recommended actions relative to achieving stated goals and objectives. The milemarker may be an interim, but important accomplishment and may be emphasized as one among many recommendations. For example, a milemarker may be the completion of a revised and up-to-date County Farmland Protection Plan that is part of the goal and objectives that seeks the reversal in the trend of farmland conversion across the County. The MileMarker can become a new benchmark for measuring further progress on an issue.



**Milestone** – This term and its associated symbol identifies a significant event that can be achieved as a result of implementing a specific course of action. For example, using the farmland protection example, a milestone may be the adoption by municipalities of a revised, up-to-date County Farmland Protection Plan. A milestone event may also be the reversal in the trend of farmland conversion as stated in the example above. Another milestone event will be the adoption of this Comprehensive Plan.

Chapter III includes a considerable amount of mapped information using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) data provided by State and County sources. These maps illustrate existing conditions related to land use, transportation, natural

resources, man-made facilities, cultural resources, public infrastructure, public facilities, demographics and socioeconomic conditions throughout the County. Many benchmarks are noted in the chapter to underscore the importance of this information in monitoring future progress towards stated goals.

Chapter IV provides summary profiles of key existing conditions within specific Niagara County communities. Each of the 20 municipalities in the County has a Community Profile that summarizes important local data and information related to land use, demographics and socioeconomic conditions. Each profile also provides summaries gathered from participating communities on significant issues, opportunities, goals and objectives categorized under each of the five Plan elements. Profile information was provided by community representatives that participated as Plan Steering Committee members. Local comprehensive plans and similar community-based documents were reviewed and information selected from these documents has been included in the Community Profiles.

### *Phase II - Plan Elements*

Phase II of the planning process focused on each of five primary Plan elements:

Chapter V – Land Use and Environment;

Chapter VI – Economic Development;

Chapter VII – County Services, Facilities and Infrastructure;

Chapter VIII – Education; and

Chapter IX – Public Health and Safety.

Chapter V discusses land use, related transportation issues, and environmental information. This chapter builds upon information provided in previous chapters, and focuses on some of the most important issues and challenges presently confronting local communities and the County as a whole with regards to land development and natural resource protection. Chapter V provides analyses and recommendations on future land use and environmental resources under a Smart Growth countywide scenario. The analyses is focused on identifying those areas of the County that are most suited to development and redevelopment as well as areas considered to be most important for resource protection. This chapter outlines recommended actions for developed, developing and undeveloped areas of the County. Concern over the continued exodus of population and businesses from urban areas in the County, the loss of viable farmlands, changes in rural character, sprawling development, and the potential loss of natural assets are addressed in Chapter V.

Chapter VI provides information relative to economic development within Niagara County. This chapter identifies issues and concerns expressed during the planning process as well as future economic development initiatives and opportunities. Much of the information contained in this chapter has been summarized from Niagara County's annual Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) report which discusses current and future economic development initiatives and opportunities in detail.

Chapter VII discusses the provision of County services, facilities and public infrastructure. This chapter contains specific information on the types of services provided to residents by various departments within Niagara County government. Information is also provided on County-owned facilities, including parklands, and other County-owned and maintained infrastructure such as roads and bridges.



Issues and opportunities discussed during the planning process focused on the lack of infrastructure and services in some areas of the County and the need for improvements to existing public infrastructure such as roads, sewer and water systems.

Chapter VIII focuses on local education and the various educational institutions and systems available within the County. Baseline information is provided on the County's ten school districts, the public library system and related facilities. Summary information on institutions of higher learning and continuing education is also provided including Niagara University, Niagara County Community College and Niagara County BOCES.

Chapter IX provides information on public health and safety, including current issues of importance expressed by stakeholders. Information relative to police, fire and emergency services, and emergency preparedness is addressed on a countywide level. Opportunities for enhanced public health and safety in the County are also addressed.

### *Phase III - Plan Implementation*

The final chapter, Chapter X is the implementation portion of the comprehensive planning process. Chapter X provides action items for implementing the various strategies and recommendations of the Plan that are discussed in previous chapters. This chapter general timeframes and prioritization of key recommendations and identifies those entities which are responsible for implementing specific actions. Chapter X provides information on possible funding sources where appropriate for specific public capital improvement projects and for undertaking other countywide initiatives, including opportunities for shared services and inter-municipal agreements.

Chapter X also emphasizes the need for review and update of the Comprehensive Plan on a regular basis. As the County's first Comprehensive Plan it is not intended to be a static document. In order for this Plan to remain relevant to County conditions, trends and needs, and to remain a viable planning and decision-making tool, it must be reviewed regularly, revised as changing conditions warrant, and allowed to evolve as part of an ongoing countywide participatory process among all communities as they adapt to new opportunities and future challenges.

Appendices accompany the Comprehensive Plan as supporting information. Appendix A includes documentation of stakeholder and public meetings held during the Plan's preparation. Additional technical information is provided in other appendices as listed in the Table of Contents. As the document evolves new information should be included as additional appendices.

**To remain relevant and useful, the Comprehensive Plan must be reviewed regularly, revised as changing conditions warrant, and allowed to evolve as part of an ongoing countywide participatory process.**

## References

The Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy. 2004. *Investing in a Better Future: A Review of the Fiscal and Competitive Advantages of Smarter Growth Development Patterns*. Mark Muro and Robert Puentes. The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C.

The League of Women Voters of Buffalo/Niagara. 2006. *At Taxpayers' Expense – How Government Policies Encourage Sprawl in Erie and Niagara Counties*. The League of Women Voters of Buffalo/Niagara, Buffalo, New York.