

Part 3 – “Whose Comp Plan is This, Anyway?”

by Doug Baird

The Tompkins County Comprehensive Plan is a slick promotional piece, but its bright and shiny surface can't stand the wear and tear of a real world inspection.

From the foreword of the County's Plan:

“THE TOMPKINS COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN presents a vision for the future of the community. It is based on a set of principles that reflect the values of the community as expressed by the County Legislature they have elected. The Plan seeks to foster a place where individual rights are protected while recognizing the benefits that can accrue to community members from common actions. It largely focuses on voluntary collaboration between the public and private sectors, but also supports the role that local regulation can play in addressing key issues impacting the entire community and helping people to live together in harmony. Where regulation is required, it should balance the burdens placed on individuals and businesses with the restrictions needed to protect or otherwise benefit the larger community. In most cases the Plan seeks to expand individual choice in terms of where and how people live their lives.”

This “vision for the future” ends up taking back everything it gives:

- It reflects the “values of the community” but only “as expressed by the County Legislature.”
- It claims to “foster a place where individual's rights are protected” but in the same sentence subordinates this to “common actions.”
- It “focuses on voluntary” but “supports the role of local regulation.”

The phrase “helping people to live together in harmony” is particularly fatuous. Harmony requires more than one voice, and that's something that is entirely missing from this “vision.”

And while the Plan states “Where regulation is required, it should balance the burdens placed on individuals and businesses with the restrictions needed to protect or otherwise benefit the larger community,” it nowhere states who will decide what these “regulations” or “burdens” are and when they are “needed.”

By removing those portions of the Comp Plan's foreword that are negated by qualifiers, this contradictory policy statement becomes clear:

This plan is based on values that reflect the principles of the County's [democratic] legislature. It uses local regulations to place burdens on individuals and businesses in serving that agenda and restricts individuals in their choice of where and how they can live.

Statements like “The Plan includes policies that, when considered together, can help create both rural and urban communities” indicate that these policies are intended to “create” new communities, rather than help existing ones. Just what these communities will be and who will benefit is the subject of this, and future blogs.

Playing the “It's not us, it's them” and “There's nothing we can do about that” shell game that has become so popular with today's government bureaucrats: Tompkins County, Cornell Cooperative Extension, and other

powerful agencies claim they are not responsible for these “local” plans, while local governments refuse to allow meaningful local participation in these plans, claiming they are “only guides,” and all parties come together to push these policies into local regulations — all without openly admitting they are doing so.

This lockstep approval process can be seen in Tompkins County’s plan to create an urban center “node” along Peruville Road and Ridge Road in Lansing, with multi-family” infill” housing extending south for 3 miles. This is a plan that would destroy Lansing’s green spaces, congest its roads, raise Lansing’s taxes through added infrastructure and school system demands, and entirely change the rural character and cultural matrix of the town. In spite of the negative impact this plan would have on Lansing’s residents, the Lansing Comprehensive Plan has adopted these changes, and every other change outlined in the County’s Plan, without demur or public debate.

There is a patent pattern of uniform behavior, uniformity simply unexplainable by the rubric of public welfare or by any other factors on which the planners have relied in their arguments.

What lies behind Tompkins County’s “Prosperity for All”

A good example of the Tompkins County Comprehensive Plan’s use of words to obfuscate, rather than to inform is the Plan’s handling of “wages and employment:”

The paragraph that begins with “Prosperity for all” ends with a back pedaling “encourage the payment of livable wages whenever practical and reasonable.” A strong positive statement is made at the beginning to stick in the reader’s mind, while the qualifiers added to the end allow planners to defend a very different result.

This clever use of juxtaposition is used to misrepresent unemployment in the Tompkins County’s rural communities:

Starting with the positive “Unemployment rates in Tompkins County have experienced the same cyclical ups and downs as New York State and the U.S., but have consistently been lower than statewide” the following statement: “Still, unemployment is considered a problem by local residents, especially rural residents, with nearly 60 percent of rural residents calling it ‘critical’” is weakened, giving the impression it may just be the feeling of rural residents and not represent the facts. [Note the use of qualifiers “still” and “considered.”] To further weaken this claim, no factual data on rural unemployment in the county is ever supplied.

While the County’s Comprehensive Plan admits that “Individual poverty rates here are quite high, around 20 per-cent in 2011” and “It is clear that not everyone in the community shares in the region’s economic prosperity” it muddies the waters with the comment “this can be partially explained by the fact that about 30 percent of the local population consists of students” and goes on to add generalized family data without specifics or insight into the plight of the county’s rural residents.

Sometimes the Tompkins County Comp Plan just ignores the current unemployment problems facing the county’s rural communities. This is the case with “underemployment” [the problem of finding a job equal to the level of education and experience.] Although this is a major topic in the County’s Plan, the focus is kept on the “underemployment” of highly educated people. That this same “underemployment” forces a disproportionate number of the county’s rural population into *unemployment* and keeps them there is never mentioned.

But most frequently the Plan refuses to admit that Tompkins County’s rural communities have any meaningful place in the county’s economic future:

“In rural areas the Plan envisions a working landscape of farms and forests providing products and jobs that support a strong rural economy, while providing for management and protection of these resources to maintain their ability to sustain the community into the future. Rural economic activities may include businesses processing agricultural and forest products, and other small businesses appropriate to a rural setting.”

It’s easy to see this “envisioning” was never done by rural residents, because this policy would exclude the lifestyles and communities of the vast majority of the county’s rural population. This is the vision of Cornell Cooperative Extension, whose powerful associations have given it a stranglehold on the policies and perceptions of rural New York.

The Tompkins County’s Comp Plan foreword states “**In most cases** [Emphasis added] the Plan seeks to expand individual choice in terms of where and how people live their lives.” It is in the rural communities that the Plan seeks to reduce those choices — limiting residents to those approved by Cornell Cooperative Extension’s “agriculture only” rural doctrine:

“Employment choices for those interested in living and working in rural areas will include full- and part time farming, independent “homestead” lifestyles, entrepreneurship in agricultural and forest product processing, and at-home workers who want to live close to nature.”

Agriculture is historically among the lowest paying of all jobs — the owners may make millions, but the workers are frequently living below the poverty level. NY farmers were furious with Cuomo on the minimum wage hike even though they are the only industry to receive a tax credit for the wage increase. The NY Farm Bureau is not only a self-proclaimed “leader in the fight against \$15,” it’s also an important voice opposing the farmworkers’ right to organize...and an important voice in planning Tompkins County’s rural policy.

A May 2016 article in *Grassroots* [the NY Farm Bureau’s “Voice of New York’s Agriculture”] points out that NY agriculture needs cheap labor to compete with Pennsylvania’s minimum wage of \$7.25. Nowhere in the article does it mention what it is like to try to live on \$7.25 an hour, or show any concern for the farmworkers who do.

While the right to organize for all workers is guaranteed in the state’s Bill of Rights, the state’s Employment Relations Act excludes farmworkers, among other labor classes, as exempt from being defined as employees, effectively denying them those same rights.

Laughably, the Tompkins County Comprehensive Plan insists “Particular attention was also paid to the recently completed Cleaner Greener Southern Tier Regional Sustainability Plan (2013) that...envisions the Southern Tier Region of the future” as a “place with revitalized cities, villages and hamlets that anchor a reinvigorated urban **and rural economy based on good paying jobs.**” [Emphasis added]

The Plan’s policy decision to make agriculture the overwhelmingly preferred industry in rural Tompkins County, along the erosion of jobs through “underemployment” from above, and cheap foreign labor from below, will only ensure a large pool of poor, unemployed rural workers to fill the low level, dead end jobs that support a “vibrant” Ithaca.

Tompkins County’s vision has regressed into an autocratic vision of the past — a stratified society that serves the goals of vested interests and leaves rural communities as the powerless suppliers of raw materials and cheap labor.

This Plan takes the big step from telling people how they should live to making them live that way. The Tompkins County Comp Plan is a “kick out notice” for rural residents unwilling or unable to conform to these policies.

The repopulation of rural communities by incomers demanding services and conveniences that local residents neither need, want, nor can afford is the death knell for their historical independence and way of life — leaving young couples unable to buy a house in the town where they were born, or even eat in the local restaurants.

“Living here is only affordable when jobs are paying wages that make household costs manageable.” proclaims the Tompkins County Comprehensive Plan.

Whether by inadvertence or design, the county’s high taxes, assessments, and unemployment rates are increasingly forcing the community’s poorer rural residents to sell the land and homes their families have lived in for generations and leave Tompkins County — a problem that the Tomkins County Comprehensive Plan neither acknowledges nor plans to prevent.

Coming soon:

Part 4 - “The Road to Hell is Paved with Good Credentials” — A look into the heart of the “urban center” scam.