

## Part 4 - The Road to Hell is Paved with Good Credentials

By Doug Baird

*The rural Town of Lansing is racing ahead to be the “the growth part of the Tompkins County area,” but when you look around, there’s no competition in sight — are we that smart . . . or that stupid?*

Ithaca was recently listed as both “the best destination for students” in the American Institute of Economic Research’s list of the best college towns in the country, and as #11 in the Top 20 cities with the “least affordable rents” by the New York Times.

What is the Problem? With 80% of your workers already forced to live outside the City, how can Ithaca attract new businesses and provide affordable housing for workers while keeping College revenues up and protecting those low-density, high rent urban neighborhoods with that “small town feeling”?

What is the Solution? Convince other municipalities to shoulder the costs of schools and services for the affordable housing your workers need, while you keep the business taxes and spending in Ithaca.

- Create a “vision,” for Tompkins County, use a lot of credentials and influence to sell it, and by the time residents realize what’s happening, it’s too late.

The new Tompkins County Comprehensive Plan heavily promotes the creation of an “Urban Center”:

“The Urban Center includes portions of the City of Ithaca, the Towns of Ithaca and Lansing, and the Villages of Cayuga Heights and Lansing and is the largest of the Development Focus Areas.”

“It is envisioned in the future at least two-thirds of all new residential development would occur in the Development Focus Areas.”

Excerpts from recent local comp plans give a clearer picture of how this residential development will be shared among the municipalities:

Village of Lansing Comp Plan:

- “All HDR [High Density Residential/Multi-Family] parcels in the Village have been developed.”

Village of Cayuga Heights Comp Plan:

- “For the purpose of land use analysis, the County plan . . . anticipates no major changes for the Village in the coming decades.”

City of Ithaca Comp Plan:

- “No significant changes to the character of low-density residential areas are proposed.”
- “No significant changes to the character of medium-density residential areas are proposed”

- “Higher-density residential uses are accommodated within the [commercial and industrial] Waterfront Mixed-Use, Urban Mixed-Use, and Enterprise areas.”

Town of Ithaca Comp Plan:

- “The HDR–High Density Residential zone accommodates detached and semi-detached (duplex) residences in a medium density setting, with a minimum lot size of 9,000 square feet (4.84 lots per net acre). Only 136 acres, or 0.7% of the Town, is zoned HDR.”
- “The bulk of residential zoned land is undeveloped, underdeveloped, or occupied by non-residential uses.”

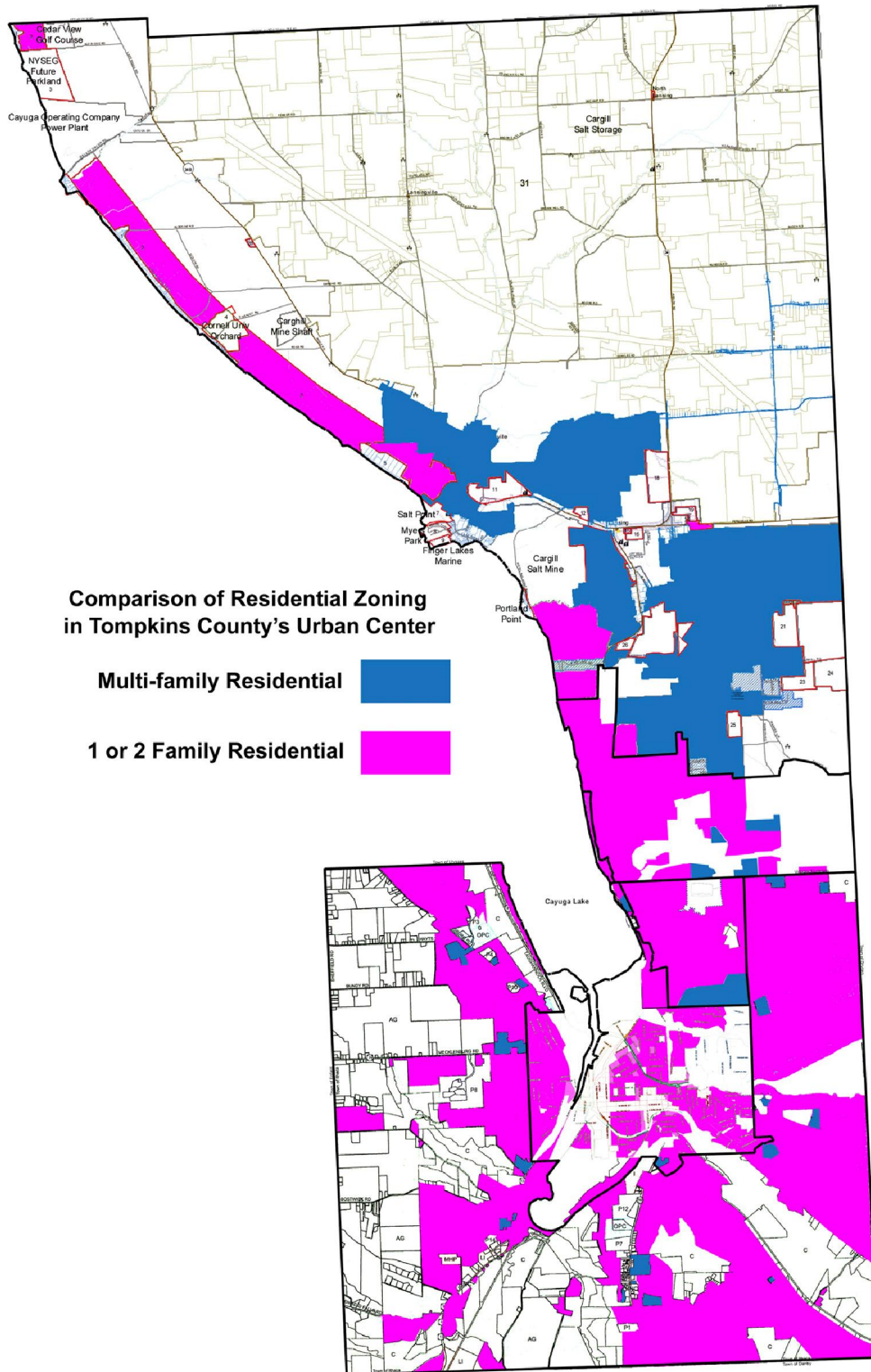
Town of Lansing Comp Plan:

- “From these residential housing maps, we can see that the area of South Lansing, which runs along Triphammer and Warren Roads, is currently unaffordable for the majority of people within the region. However, due to close proximity to jobs, shopping and the university it would make for an ideal location for housing, which would provide the opportunity for people to earn a living and spend less than the 30% threshold for affordability.”
- “By creating compact neighborhoods of high population density, TCAT would be more likely to expand into this area and thereby making housing more affordable by eliminating the costs of additional vehicles and associated transportation.”
- “Housing expansion in the form of new developments and PUD’s [Planned Unit Developments - a term used to describe a housing development not subject to standard zoning requirements for the area.] will result in increased traffic and the need to expand roads and/or mass transit to accommodate the resulting increase in population. As with municipal water and sewer, the logical choice would be to gradually expand out from the village into the area of South Lansing and eventually further north.”

Since the Town of Lansing needs to “create neighborhoods,” “expand roads,” and add “municipal water and sewer” to their infrastructure, as well as being miles further away from Ithaca’s job and business center than any other municipality in the County’s “Urban Center” plan — is this *really* the best planning solution?

This blog will explore how well this plan accords with the publicly stated policies and goals of the Tompkins County Comprehensive Plan’s “Urban Center,” and how equitably the “burdens” of this plan will be shared.

A map is a better indicator than the words of planners and politicians, so let’s begin with a visual comparison of the 1- or 2-family, and multi-family residential zones in the County’s Urban Center:



## Scurvy Survey

The Town of Lansing survey never asked residents if they actually wanted a town center, only what should be included “In the town center” when they get one. Regardless of the soundness of the survey’s sampling methodology, the selection and wording of the questions clearly indicates the intent to gather responses that validate predetermined policies.

Many of the survey questions are so general that the results could be used to support almost anything.

And if that isn’t enough evidence of manipulation, the Lansing Comp Plan uses statements like "the survey indicated strong community support for a 'Complete Streets' study and approach for this area to include safe travel, pedestrian and bicycle access," when the survey responses only indicated that residents support “bike lanes” and “improving sidewalks,” and the survey never even mentions the ‘Complete Streets’ study.

Once a response has been elicited that can be made to fit a preselected Comp Plan agenda, the public “participation” is over.

90% of those surveyed supported “laws or policies to protect scenic views and natural areas,” yet the Comp Plan recommends “infilling” the fields and woods along Triphammer Road [the highway with the best Lake views in Lansing] with High-Density residential developments.

*Ironically, the survey results showed that most town residents thought town officials did not respond to resident concerns or communicate information well.*

The Town of Lansing Comprehensive Plan is only an echo of the Tompkins County Comprehensive Plan. It backs exactly the same policies, and was jockeyed through its entire formulation and pre-approval process without any meaningful participation or oversight by the town’s residents.

There is very little of Lansing in the “Lansing” Comp Plan.

“Lansing’s” Plan includes no fact based models or projections of the impact that thousands of acres of new high-density development would have on the town’s schools, taxes, and the same “rural nature” that the survey listed as the “Top reason to live in Town of Lansing”. Instead, the Town of Lansing Comp Plan claims both that agriculture reduces taxes because of the low cost of services compared to new residential development, and that new residential development will also reduce taxes.

In a January 20, 2017 article in the Lansing Star, Town of Lansing Supervisor Ed LaVigne stated: “I did not have to let the Planning Board review it, but out of respect for them they have their input.” This public announcement is just one more example of the complete lack of control local residents have over the policies that affect their future and the future of their town.

However, there may be an unexpected stumbling block in the Town Board’s rush to push this Plan through:

New York State Town Law § 272-a requires that *both* the Lansing Comprehensive Planning Committee and the Lansing Town Board “**assure full opportunity for citizen participation in the preparation of**

**such proposed plan**” — allowing a resident to speak for two minutes at a Town Board meeting while banning any questions hardly meets these legal requirements.

### Elitist Policy Making

Planning in Tompkins County today is a textbook example of elitist policy making:

“Public officials and administrators merely carry out policies decided on by the elite, which flows 'down' to the mass.” – California State University Long Beach, Graduate Center for Public Policy and Administration.

In other words:

“Tompkins County should be a place where all levels of government work cooperatively to address regional issues.” – Tompkins County Comprehensive Plan

This policy is perfectly represented by the Tompkins County Comprehensive Plan’s flow ‘down’ to the Town of Lansing Comp Plan.

### Red Flags and Ag-Gags

Examining the wording of the Tompkins County Comprehensive Plan reveals its underlying elitist ideology: “All in all, the colleges define the community” proclaims the Plan, and in many ways and on many occasions reiterates this idea. Another common thread is the insistence on “restrictions needed to protect or otherwise benefit the larger community.”

The use of the word “protect” is an interesting sidelight in studying local and county plans. The “haves” are always interested in “protecting” what is theirs. Although the County’s Plan “protects” agriculture 25 times, it does not mention “protecting” any other rural landowner even once.

A more detailed examination of how the various plans in Tompkins County “protect” its power elite not only with “sweetheart” regulatory policies, but also by covering up wrongdoing, is the subject of future blogs.

### The Real County Development Plan

Taking the County Plan’s stated development goals:

- “Tompkins County should be a place where new development is focused in compact, walkable, mixed-use communities.”
- “Compact development lowers costs of government services by utilizing and reinvesting in existing infrastructure and broadening the base that bears the cost of maintaining that infrastructure into the future.”

and adding the City of Ithaca’s existing assets:

- High walkability ratio.

- Existing infrastructure.
- Low-density residential neighborhoods of old wood frame houses that are perfect for redevelopment.

Results in the City of Ithaca being the best location for building the affordable housing needed for its own workers . . . but that is not the County’s plan.

The Town of Ithaca, which surrounds the City, and admits: “The bulk of residential zoned land is undeveloped, underdeveloped, or occupied by non-residential uses” is the second best choice . . . but that’s not the County’s plan either.

The Villages of Cayuga Heights and Lansing follow as the third and fourth choices. It doesn’t matter which is which, because neither is of them the County’s choice.

Instead, the Town of Lansing is the County’s default, but unannounced, choice as the development site for the thousands of housing units needed for their “vision.” It’s a rural town that has no existing infrastructure to support this development, the town that is the farthest from the county’s business center, and by coincidence, a town that has a different school and tax district from the all other municipalities in the “development focus area.”

By adding the rural Town of Lansing to the Urban Center’s “development focus area,” County planners can bypass policies that: “encourage municipalities to protect rural character and scenic resources by limiting [urban] sprawl” and use it as a dumping ground for all the high-density housing the other municipalities don’t want.

Even though “It is the policy of Tompkins County to: Ensure the benefits and costs of economic development incentives are distributed equitably and there is an open and transparent process for decision-making” — they are keeping Lansing residents in the dark about their plans for the town’s future.

The “Urban Center” housing agenda is an example of everything that’s wrong with planners and planning in Tompkins County today:

- Academic credentials at the service of vested interests.
- Presenting a lesser plan to appease a greater master.

And maybe even worse; in a county with such righteous pretensions of being a seat of learning and illumination — it’s intellectually dishonest.