

EVALUATION OF TUG HILL COMMISSION PROGRAMS



WHITE PAPER TO THE GOVERNOR AND LEGISLATURE

As required by Article 37, Executive Law

January 2019

Prepared by the New York State Tug Hill Commission in cooperation
with the Councils of Governments of the Tug Hill region



Helping local governments and citizens shape the future of the Tug Hill region.



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January 29, 2019

Dear Governor Cuomo, Senator Stewart-Cousins, and Speaker Heastie,

The NYS Tug Hill Commission is honored to present our every-five-year report, as required by the commission's enabling legislation, Article 37 of the Executive Law, in regard to the effectiveness of commission programs. We are pleased to share that our Tug Hill communities and local officials continue to significantly value their partnership and working relationships with the commission.

This report evaluates the Tug Hill Commission's programs and services through a survey of local elected and appointed officials from the region's 59 towns and villages, four counties, and partner organizations at a variety of levels. Conducted in the spring of 2018, under the guidance of the five councils of governments that operate in the Tug Hill region, the survey achieved a 64% response rate, with at least one survey returned from every municipality in the Tug Hill region. The survey was originally developed by Cornell University over 30 years ago, and remains very similar to the original, which allows for comparison over time.

2018 survey results rated all of the commission's core programs – land use planning, training, grant writing, natural resource support, circuit rider services, and technical assistance – as essential or important, as well as effective. Cooperation, expertise, and understanding area needs are the commission's top-rated characteristics. Ninety-seven percent of respondents strongly agree or agree that the Tug Hill Commission should continue its mission.

Our thanks to each of you for continuing support of the Tug Hill Commission and the region we serve.

Sincerely,

Jan Bogdanowicz
Chairman

Katie Malinowski
Executive Director

Cc: Rossana Rosado, Secretary of State
Tug Hill State legislative delegation – Senators Griffo and Ritchie; and Assemblymembers Barclay, Blankenbush, Buttenschon, and Smullen

Article 37 of the Executive Law

2018 marked the 45th anniversary of the New York State Tug Hill Commission. For its first 25 years, the commission was a legislative commission under Chapter 972 of the Laws of 1972 and its subsequent amendments. Known as the Temporary State Commission on Tug Hill, the commission operated under various “sunset” provisions of each amendment to Chapter 972. In 1998, the commission was established as an executive branch commission under Article 37 of the Executive Law. For the past twenty years the commission has been administratively linked to the New York Department of State and continues to operate as an independent commission serving the Tug Hill region and its communities.

Article 37 of the Executive Law defines the Tug Hill region as a 2,100 square mile, 1 million acre region “lying between Lake Ontario, the Black River and Oneida Lake,” encompassing forest, farmland, and waters important to the state, and deserving of technical assistance due to its small population and somewhat depressed standard of living. Article 37 establishes the Tug Hill Commission as a non-regulatory state agency that provides technical assistance to the region’s towns and villages and to community organizations of the Tug Hill region with the mission of “municipal assistance, conservation, preservation and development in the region.”

Section 847-e of Article 37 calls for an annual report to the governor and state legislature (the commission’s annual newsletter report *Headwaters*) and an every five-year report on the results of a survey of local officials “throughout the Tug Hill region in regard to the effectiveness of commission programs.” This *White Paper* is that report.

Other Tug Hill Related State Legislation

In addition to its enabling statute described above, other state legislation recognizes the importance of the Tug Hill region to New York State. In particular, Section 533 of the Real Property Tax Law provides for the payment of a portion of property taxes by the state on conservation easements the state holds in the region. Currently, the State of New York holds conservation easements in the Tug Hill region on almost 48,000 acres of land along the Salmon River in Oswego County, and in the East Branch of Fish Creek watershed in Lewis County.

Chapter 846 of the Laws of 1992, the Tug Hill Reserve Act, provides for local reserve plans, adopted by councils of governments in the region, as a means of protecting Tug Hill natural resources of national statewide, and regional significance. The Act finds that “coordinated, local action will provide the most enduring and cost-effective method of retaining the rural and remote character of this land, and of retaining the independent way of life of its people and their economy. The Cooperative Tug Hill Council (CTHC) has an adopted reserve plan, and over the past few years has approved new “Special Areas” maps for 14 of the plan’s 16 towns.

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An amendment to the Public Service Law (Chapter 72 of the Laws of 2004) designated the Tug Hill Commission with “Party Status” for the siting of major transmission facilities under Article VII of the Public Service Law. The commission’s policy on this designation is to remain neutral in its role under any Article VII proceeding and to use its position as a “party” to stay informed of any proceeding regarding a major transmission facility in the region and to use its designation and receipt of information to ensure affected municipalities are informed during any siting process. The commission is currently monitoring the Moses-Adirondack Smart Path Reliability Project, which is located just east of the Tug Hill region boundary.

Commission Organization and Programs

The commission is governed by a board of nine individuals whom are residents of the region and appointed by the Governor, the President Pro tem of the Senate, and Speaker of the Assembly. Commissioners serve five year terms and oversee all policy, finances and staff of the commission. Both the commission’s senate and assembly appointments are up-to-date. The commission’s chairman is awaiting his reappointment by Governor Cuomo, and there are two governor appointment vacancies on the board.

The commission serves 59 towns and villages in the region, with eight specialists based in the Watertown state office building and four field staff who work out of their homes. Service is delivered primarily through the region’s five councils of government (COGs), independent intermunicipal organizations supported by the commission and local government dues. Membership in COGs has grown in the past few years, with Cooperative Tug Hill Council membership increasing from 16 to 21, and River Area Council of Governments membership growing from 5 to 7. COGs now include 54 Tug Hill municipalities (38 of the region's 41 towns and 14 of its 19 villages) as well as three outside region municipalities (one town and two villages). Each COG is served by the commission’s local government advisors or “circuit riders,” the commission’s eyes and ears in the field.

Tug Hill Commission programs focus on three primary program areas: land use planning and technical assistance; natural resources management and development; and community development. At any one time, commission staff is working on 50 or more projects, all with a local government or organization “client” that requested the assistance. Projects include: comprehensive planning assistance; initiating and updating land use regulations; leadership and capacity development through workshops and the commission’s annual Local Government Conference; education through a series of technical and issue papers; projects related to watersheds and water quality, energy development, restoration, and recreation; infrastructure planning and management; mapping and asset management; and “Main Street” revitalization.

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The commission's annual budget appropriation is about \$1.1 million, most of it from the State's General Fund. As part of Governor Cuomo's efforts to curtail growth in the state agency expenditures, the commission has operated on level funded appropriations since 2010.

Earlier Tug Hill Leaders Surveys

The Tug Hill Commission exists, first and foremost, because people in the Tug Hill region want it. It was local initiative that led to the commission's creation in 1972, when the threat of taking forest land out of production drew the region together in concern.

The commission has relied on local officials and citizens to guide its programs from the beginning, when it gauged local concerns through eight public forums that involved 1,200 people in 1974, to its transition from study mode to an operational agency in 1981, to the start of local leaders surveys to keep programs on track and to measure support for those programs.

The commission did its first local leaders survey in 1985, designed in cooperation with Cornell University. Each of the surveys done since has utilized the questions developed by Cornell, changed only as commission programs changed.

Surveys have been conducted in 1985, 1990, 1994, 1997, 2002, 2008, 2013, and 2018. Results have been comparable over that period of time, with 90% or more of local officials responding that they wish to see commission programs continued.

Results of 2018 Survey

The 2018 survey was mailed to 369 local elected and appointed municipal officials, and local and regional partner organizations. Responses to the survey totaled 236, for a phenomenal return rate of 64%. Appendix A provides the survey questions and summary of responses.

At least one completed survey was received from every Tug Hill town and village. Eighty-eight percent of respondents reported working with Tug Hill Commission staff frequently or occasionally in the last five years.

In the categories measured for importance, six items were rated over 90% essential or important:

- 96%: **Workshops** to increase local officials' skills including annual LGC
- 96%: **Land use planning** assistance to towns and villages
- 95%: Helping communities find **money** for water, sewer, housing, etc.

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95%: Support to **groups of communities working together**, especially local councils of governments

93%: Helping communities find **money** for parks, recreation, downtown revitalization

93%: Helping communities **protect the environment**

In rating the effectiveness of commission programs, the following categories were the top programs, combining the excellent and good ratings:

91%: **Workshops** to increase local officials' skills including annual LGC

85%: **Land use planning** assistance to towns and villages

82%: Support to **groups of communities working together**, especially local councils of governments

78%: **Circuit rider attendance** at municipal board meetings

77%: Helping communities **protect the environment**

72%: Helping communities find **money** for water, sewer, housing, etc.

Survey respondents are asked about the commission's performance on a number of characteristics that are valued by Tug Hill communities. The following list shows the combined "excellent and good" responses for those six characteristics.

Cooperative (95%)

Expertise (93%)

Understanding Area Needs (90%)

Promptness (90%)

Objectivity (89%)

Innovativeness (85%)

Lastly, the survey asks the all-important question: **should the Tug Hill Commission continue its mission**. Ninety-seven percent of respondents said strongly agree or agree.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the 2018 Local Leaders Survey, and consultation with the region's five councils of governments, the Tug Hill Commission makes the following recommendations:

1. No changes in the Tug Hill Commission statute – Article 37 of the Executive Law – are deemed necessary at this time.
2. In FY19-20, the commission's Director of Planning will retire. The commission should be allowed to internally promote the Senior Planner, and backfill the new vacancy with a Grade 14 Planner, and have a five month transition period with all three planning staff sharing knowledge and shifting roles and responsibilities.
3. Increase commission state funding to allow the filling of at least one of the three remaining vacancies. Recently growth in two of the region's councils of governments has added additional demands on current staff. In addition, more staff attrition is expected soon, and additional succession planning is critical to transfer knowledge and train new staff about the unique region and commission approach.
4. Increase the commission's dry appropriation, to allow the organization to take advantage of other potential sources of funding, such as non-profit and federal grants.

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Appendix A: 2018 Tug Hill Commission Local Leaders Survey Summary

NYS Tug Hill Commission Local Leaders Survey 2018

369 surveys mailed out April 17, 2018/236 surveys returned for a 64% return rate.

Section 1. Local Leader Profile

1. In what town or village do you live? 70% Town 25% Village

5	Adams(T)	5	Camden(V)	3	Forestport	6	Martinsburg	4	Rodman	5	West Monroe
3	Adams(V)	1	Castorland(V)	3	Harrisburg	3	Montague	2	Rutland	4	West Turin
2	Albion	3	Central Square(V)	2	Hastings	3	Orwell	2	Steuben	2	Williamstown
4	Annsville	4	Champion	3	Holland Patent(V)	4	Osceola	2	Sylvan Beach(V)	3	Worth
4	Amboy	3	Cleveland(V)	2	Lee	8	Parish(T)	2	Trenton		Do not live in TH region
4	Ava	2	Constableville(V)	8	Lewis	2	Parish(V)	4	Turin(T)		
3	Black River(V)	5	Constantia	4	Leyden	2	Pinckney	3	Turin(V)		
5	Boonville(T)	1	Copenhagen(V)	5	Lorraine	1	Port Leyden(V)	4	Vienna		
3	Boonville(V)	2	Denmark	2	Lowville(T)	4	Redfield	5	Watertown		
3	Boylston	3	Florence	7	Lowville(V)	1	Renssen(T)	1	Western		
2	Camden(T)	4	Floyd	3	Lyons Falls(V)	2	Renssen(V)	2	West Carthage(V)		

Other

City of Watertown (2)	Town of Greig	Village of Pulaski
Village of Carthage (2)	Village of Brownville	Village of Ilion, Herkimer County
Village of Deferiet (2)	Town of Mexico	North Elba, Essex County
Town of Wilna (7)	Town of Madrid, St Lawrence County	Town of Marcellus, Onondaga County
Town of LeRay	Deerfield (County legislator)	City of Syracuse, Onondaga County
Town of Sandy Creek (2)	Town of Dekalb, St Lawrence County	Town of Marcy
Town of Clay	Village of Phoenix	Not in the area
Town of Richland	Town of Scriba (2)	City of Oswego

In what county do you live?

24% Jefferson 26% Lewis 23% Oneida 23% Oswego 3% other

2. Which of the following organizations or groups are you currently a member?

22%	town board	9%	village board	6%	farm or forestry organization
15%	planning board	9%	economic dev group/chamber of commerce	6%	fire company/rescue squad
14%	town clerk	7%	environmental/historical/land trust org.	5%	county governmental agency
12%	highway/public works superintendent	7%	village clerk	0.5%	school/other district board(s)
10%	hunting or fishing club	6%	outdoor recreation club	12%	other
10%	zoning board of appeals	6%	other town/village official		
10%	council of governments	6%	county legislator		

Other

Mayor (2)	NYS DEC (3)	Town historian/town BAR
Town supervisor (2)	NYSERDA Board	Town engineer
Supervisor/Library board	American Legion Aux	Boy Scouts (2)
Deputy supervisor	Not for profit (2)	Soil and Water
North Country Clerk/Treasurers Association	Watershed agency	Home consortium
Planner	Work for nonprofit	Cooperative Extension
State agency	Library board, church organization	
Grass roots community group (drug prevention and community improvement, Lewis County – it's real and it's local)		

3. How often have you worked with Tug Hill Commission staff (or circuit riders) in the last five years?

51% Frequently 37% Occasionally 12% Not at all

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Section 2. Program Effectiveness and Importance

The Commission’s mission is “helping local governments and citizens shape the future of the Tug Hill region.” Its legislative charge calls for enhancing the region’s environment and economy through work with local governments and organizations. In light of this, please rank the Commission’s programs for **IMPORTANCE** (in Question 4) and **EFFECTIVENESS** (in Question 5).

4. How would you rate the *IMPORTANCE* of the following Tug Hill Commission programs to the future of the Tug Hill region? (Please check () only one for each category.) (E=Essential, I=Important, NI=Not Important, DK=Don't Know)

	<i>E</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>NI</i>	<i>DK</i>
Workshops to increase local officials’ skills including annual Local Government Conference	65%	31%	0.4%	2%
Helping communities find money for water, sewer, housing, and similar grants and loans	64%	31%	1%	3%
Land use planning assistance to towns and villages	59%	37%	1%	2%
Support to groups of communities working together, especially local councils of governments (Cooperative Tug Hill Council, Northern Oneida County COG, North Shore COG, River Area COG and Salmon Rivers COG)	57%	38%	1%	3%
Helping communities find money for parks, recreation, downtown revitalization	53%	40%	3%	3%
Helping communities protect the environment	52%	41%	2%	4%
Helping towns and villages in solving day-to-day legal, accounting, computer, and similar problems	46%	42%	6%	5%
Circuit rider attendance at municipal board meetings	43%	44%	6%	4%
Helping recreation trail development (skiing, ATV's, snowmobiles, scenic highways, etc.)	39%	54%	4%	2%
Educational programs to increase local citizens’ and children’s understanding of natural and cultural resources	37%	51%	3%	8%
Technical assistance to farmers and farm businesses	33%	50%	6%	10%
Technical assistance to forest landowners and forest products businesses	32%	52%	7%	9%
Technical assistance to chambers of commerce and similar groups	25%	56%	7%	11%

5. How would you rate the *EFFECTIVENESS* of the following programs of the Tug Hill Commission? (Please check () only one for each category.) (E=Excellent, G=Good, F=Fair, P=Poor, NEI=Not Enough Info to Rate)

	<i>E</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>NEI</i>
Workshops to increase local officials’ skills including annual Local Government Conference	66%	25%	3%	0.4%	4%
Circuit rider attendance at municipal board meetings	54%	24%	3%	1%	15%
Land use planning assistance to towns and villages	53%	32%	5%	0%	8%
Support to groups of communities working together, especially local councils of governments (Cooperative Tug Hill Council, Northern Oneida County COG, North Shore COG, River Area COG and Salmon Rivers COG)	50%	32%	3%	0.4%	11%
Helping communities protect the environment	38%	39%	4%	0.4%	17%
Helping communities find money for water, sewer, housing, and similar grants and loans	36%	36%	7%	0.4%	20%
Helping communities find money for parks, recreation, downtown revitalization	35%	34%	9%	1%	20%
Helping towns and villages in solving day-to-day legal, accounting, computer, and similar problems	35%	30%	6%	1%	26%
Educational programs to increase local citizens’ and children’s understanding of natural and cultural resources	28%	39%	8%	2%	22%
Helping recreation trail development (skiing, ATV's, snowmobiles, scenic highways, etc.)	27%	40%	8%	2%	22%
Technical assistance to forest landowners and forest products businesses	23%	31%	5%	1%	38%
Technical assistance to chambers of commerce and similar groups	22%	26%	7%	0.4%	42%
Technical assistance to farmers and farm businesses	21%	26%	6%	2%	43%

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6. How would you rate the Tug Hill Commission on the following characteristics? (Please check () only one for each characteristic) (E=Excellent, G=Good, F=Fair, P=Poor, DK=Don't Know)

	<i>E</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>DK</i>
Cooperation	74%	21%	1%	0%	3%
Expertise	69%	24%	2%	0%	4%
Understanding area needs	64%	26%	4%	0%	5%
Promptness	62%	28%	2%	0%	7%
Objectivity	54%	35%	3%	0.4%	7%
Innovativeness	50%	35%	4%	1%	8%

Section 3. Commission Role

The Tug Hill Commission provides for the future of the region through help to local governments and organizations. It is a provider of information, expertise, and service. It does not regulate. It does not set policy for the region. Please let us know how you feel about this in answering the following questions. (Please check () the **one** answer that best represents your opinion.)

7. **Should the Tug Hill Commission continue its mission? (Mission - Helping local governments and citizens shape the future of the Tug Hill region.)**

81% *Strongly Agree* 16% *Agree* 0.4% *Disagree* 0% *Strongly disagree* 2% *Don't know*

8. **How important do you feel local control is to your community?**

84% *Very important* 9% *Moderately important* 3% *Slightly important* 0% *Not important at all* 3% *Don't know*

9. **Does the Tug Hill Commission work to enhance local control?**

58% *Almost always* 21% *Often* 7% *Sometimes* 0.4% *Almost never* 13% *Don't know*

10. **How important do you think intermunicipal cooperation and planning are to the Tug Hill Region?**

77% *Very important* 16% *Moderately important* 2% *Slightly important* 0.4% *Not important at all* 3% *Don't know*

11. **Does the Tug Hill Commission work effectively to support cooperation and planning?**

65% *Almost always* 22% *Often* 4% *Sometimes* 0% *Almost never* 8% *Don't know*

12. **“The Tug Hill Commission provides services which local governments need and cannot afford by themselves.”**

66% *Strongly agree* 25% *Agree* 0.4% *Disagree* 0% *Strongly disagree* 8% *Don't know*

13) **Are there any concerns in your community which you feel the Tug Hill Commission should be addressing, but is not now? If Yes, what concerns are they?**

(A sample of the 33 total comments received follow.)

- Helping small villages with forming community based groups to aid in revitalization efforts. Some guidance would be highly beneficial. Also, helping small main streets bring in local businesses.
- With additional funding from the state, the issue of broadband needs to be addressed a little stronger.
- There are a number of vacant/foreclosed properties throughout the region and local municipalities don't have the money to deal with these. Some cities have land banks but it's doubtful that they work with rural towns.
- Wind and solar issues.
- More recreation uses, trails, camping, hunting use of county and state land, permanent snowmobile trails.

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- I believe we need more and more emphasis on cooperation and shared service among municipalities. THC is working in this regard and is an independent organization to continue to lead this effort.
- THC is able to “adjust on the fly” to an ever changing world of government responsibilities and needs.

14) What is the MOST IMPORTANT thing that the Tug Hill Commission has done for your community or area?

(A sample of the 172 total comments received follow.)

- Assistance with zoning, mapping, special areas.
- Coordination and mutual support with land use topics.
- They have been an invaluable tool when we were redoing our zoning and subdivision laws. Between the training to the advice and maps. Could not have done it without their help.
- Help writing and processing our comprehensive plan.
- A lot with planning board and town board.
- Helping to develop zoning laws, training planning board and zba members and other town officers.
- Assisting towns with planning board’s efforts to maintain our town’s natural environment and understanding the needs of each unique town.
- Official road map. Designation of sensitive lands and areas. Flood plain help. GIS mapping.
- Assist in land use planning.
- Facilitated establishing and training a board of appeals. Provided information and workshops with knowledgeable answers at board meetings.
- Helping with minimal maintenance roads.
- Work together to protect forestlands and associated economic and cultural values (timber, recreation, traditional uses).
- Tug Hill is helping us to understand the hows and whys of the wind mills that are being proposed in our town.
- Provide the local government conference for municipalities. Work in natural resources including watersheds.
- The THC being a source of information on conservation and environmental issues has been a great benefit. One of several examples would be providing information and maps on designated trout streams. Facilitating various meetings is another.
- Train local officials that literally have no way to understand what their functions should be.
- Local government conference held at JCC each year – very informative.
- Circuit riders being at our town meetings. Giving them help and expertise to the board.
- Training staff for planning and zoning departments. Support for ongoing GIS mapping for highway, water system, planning and zoning.
- Helped in writing and securing grant monies.
- Keeping us informed of grant availability and assist in applying for funds.
- Helped with grants and dissolution of village.
- Tug Hill Commission works with all towns, boards and groups bringing them together to solve common problems and issues. We are fortunate to have them in our region to help us and be a resource for this area.
- Knowledgeable advice. Dedicated staffing.
- THC has brought fresh ideas that sometimes the town did not even know were available. Their familiarity with other towns experiencing similar struggles enables them to help us to find the best solutions to our problems.
- Wonderful resource for guidance on many items of importance for local governments.
- Guidance and information and streamlining zoning code in table form.
- Helping smaller communities find resources they need for both undertaking necessary projects and improving decision making.
- Giving our town a “sense of worth,” providing the tools and information to develop as a rural area.
- Not sure-do not hear much news regarding Tug Hill Commission.

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15) Please make any other comments on what should happen to the Tug Hill Commission programs.

(A sample of the 81 total comments received follow.)

- Water and wastewater is a weakness in Lewis County and if THC would be able to bring more resources to that challenge, that would be a great benefit.
- We need to keep working together on guidelines for low volume roads and minimum maintenance laws.
- I think they should get more involved in helping to keep industry in our area, small business or large. (farming is a must)
- The local government conference is essential. It is the only resource many small towns have for training and education related to local government positions.
- Perhaps further “marketing” of documents and white papers you have available.
- Possibly more classes/training around to various towns thus allowing training accessibility and being able to meet commission staff.
- Help with wind and solar, recreation. Tug Hill has a major flaw for snowmobiles. Very few permanent legal snowmobile trails and ATV. Outlaw steel track studs on snowmobiles on 2019 sleds and newer. Too many flat tires on vehicles.
- Not sure on answering this question. The THC is always available and willing to help with any ideas or problems that arise in town government. They are very active in the environmental aspect of our area. They have the knowledge and research for our communities, whether it be for town government or an environmental group. The towns could not function without the help and assistance from the THC and CTHC.
- I very strongly support efforts to fully fund the Tug Hill Commission so they can remain a strong supporter of our local communities in Upstate New York, for years to come. Without this group, I don’t know where we would go for assistance on many of our local matters.
- GREAT JOB! Thank you!
- The Tug Hill Commission serves to be a very important part of our town’s ways of keeping our town operating and functioning well and correctly. Our town depends a lot on Tug Hill.
- There are no changes or improvements that I can suggest. The Tug Hill Commission members that I have visited with are always very helpful, knowledgeable and willing to assist with any issues we were facing at the time.
- I feel with our small communities and boards made up of volunteers in many cases, the commission provides a critical role in providing insight, guidance and information to assist us in making informed decisions to better our communities. 110% pleased with commission’s response to all my requests.
- The commission does a good job in supporting local government. They could help even more with more support from the state.
- An organization like the Tug Hill Commission is very important in rural areas like ours where many municipalities don’t have the resources to address and be knowledgeable about everything that they need to do.
- I hope Albany realizes the importance of THC resources and circuit riders contributions to our region. I believe Tug Hill has many good citizens, but we also seem to have a higher proportion of people who don’t understand the fragile environment we live in. I hope we can continue good programs and assistance and overcome some of our obstacles and improve the pride in our area.
- The THC programs are essential to the communities it serves. It insures that the different small local governments can be truly functional governments. Local groups such as mine are better informed with issues they are concerned with. The information, made available, is usually available during the planning stages where true input can be given, and not during the release of a draft plan when most decisions have already been made. The THC needs to continue at least at its present level of operation. The Tug Hill Commission fulfills its mission far better than any other state commission or agency that I know of.