

EVALUATION OF TUG HILL COMMISSION PROGRAMS



WHITE PAPER TO THE GOVERNOR AND LEGISLATURE

As required by Article 37, Executive Law

January 2024

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 24, 2024

Dear Governor Hochul, 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 2023, under the guidance of the five councils of governments that operate in the Tug Hill region, the survey achieved a 55.6% response rate. The survey was originally developed by Cornell University over 35 years ago, and remains very similar to the original, which allows for comparison over time.

2023 survey results rated all 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-nine 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: Robert Rodriguez, Secretary of State
Tug Hill State legislative delegation – Senators Griffo and Walczyk; and Assemblymembers Barclay, Blankenbush, Buttenschon, Gray and Smullen

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Tug Hill Region Councils of Governments



Article 37 of the Executive Law

2023 marked the 50th 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 25 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.

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

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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.

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. Only the commission's assembly appointments are up to date. The commission has requested reappointment of Chairman Jan Bogdanowicz, and has submitted two additional candidates for the governor appointment vacancies on the board. The commission's three senate appointments are also seeking reappointment.

The commission serves 59 towns and villages in the region, with nine 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 since the commission's last white paper, with Cooperative Tug Hill Council membership increasing from 21 to 22, River Area Council of Governments membership growing from seven to 11, and Salmon Rivers Council of Governments growing from five to six. COGs now include 55 Tug Hill municipalities (38 of the region's 41 towns and 17 of its 18 villages) as well as five outside region municipalities (two towns and three villages). Each COG is served by the commission's local government advisors or "circuit riders," the commission's eyes and ears in the field. With the continual interest from outside region municipalities in receiving Tug Hill Commission services, the commission board adopted a new outside region policy in 2023, included in Appendix B. The policy generally states that while the commission would be open to providing services to the larger geography described in the commission's enabling legislation, to do so requires more state resources to hire more staff. Until that time, the commission cannot extend its services to any additional municipalities.

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; developing 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

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planning and management; mapping and asset management; and “Main Street” revitalization.

The commission’s annual budget appropriation is about \$1.2 million, most of it from the State’s General Fund, and currently allows for 15 FTEs.

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 conducted its first local leaders survey in 1985, designed in cooperation with Cornell University. Each of the surveys completed 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, 2018, and 2023. 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 2023 Survey

The 2023 survey was mailed to 381 local elected and appointed municipal officials, and local and regional partner organizations. Responses to the survey totaled 212, for a solid return rate of 55.6%. Appendix A provides the survey questions and summary of responses.

Ninety-one 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:

- 98%: **Workshops** to increase local officials’ skills including annual LGC
- 97%: Helping communities find **money** for water, sewer, housing, etc.
- 97%: **Land use planning** assistance to towns and villages
- 96%: Support to **groups of communities working together**, especially local councils of governments
- 96%: Helping communities **protect the environment**
- 94%: Helping communities find **money** for parks, recreation, downtown revitalization

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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
- 87%: **Land use planning** assistance to towns and villages
- 85%: Helping communities **protect the environment**
- 84%: Support to **groups of communities working together**, especially local councils of governments
- 82%: **Circuit rider attendance** at municipal board meetings
- 81%: Helping communities find **money** for parks, recreation, downtown revitalization

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 (98%)
- Expertise (96%)
- Understanding Area Needs (94%)
- Promptness (95%)
- Objectivity (93%)
- Innovativeness (90%)

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

Recommendations

Based on the results of the 2023 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. Continue to allow the commission to fill vacancies as staff retire or move to other employment. This has greatly improved in the past few years, and the results of our local leaders' survey show that.
3. Increase the number of full-time equivalents and proportionate funding as additional communities seek to join the region's councils of governments and thus receive Tug Hill Commission services.

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4. Increase the commission's dry, special revenue other appropriation, to allow the organization to take advantage of other potential sources of funding, such as non-profit and federal grants.

Appendix A: 2023 Tug Hill Commission Local Leaders Survey Summary

NYS Tug Hill Commission Local Leaders Survey – 2023

212 out of 381 surveys mailed on April 14, 2023 were returned for a return rate of 55.6%.

Section 1. Local Leader Profile

Your responses to this survey are strictly confidential, unless you choose to share your name at the end. Please give us the following information to help us match responses by geographic area and your involvement in local matters.

1. In what town or village do you live? (# of responses)

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

Other:

Carthage - 1	Mannsville - 1	Oriskany - 1	Ellisburg - 1
Deferiet - 3	Theresa - 1	New Bremen - 1	Ilion - 1
Wilna - 8	Lyme - 1	Mexico - 1	Scriba - 1
Brownville - 1	Croghan - 1	Henderson Harbor - 1	Richland - 1

In what county do you live? (# of responses/% of respondents)

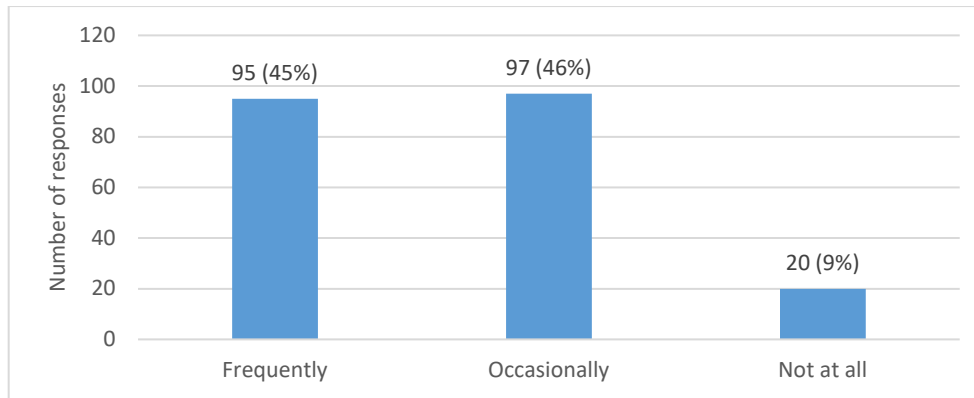
Jefferson – 53/25%	Lewis – 51/24%	Oneida – 63/30%	Oswego – 40/19%	Other – 5/2%
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2. Which of the following organizations or groups are you currently a member of? (# of responses/% of respondents)

Town board – 46/12%	Village board – 18/5%	Other town/village official – 13/3%	County legislator – 7/2%
Planning board – 36/9%	Fire co/rescue squad – 18/5%	Village clerk – 11/3%	Farm or forestry organization – 5/1%
Town clerk – 30/8%	Hunting – 16/4%	County government agency – 11/3%	Other – 19/5%
ZBA – 25/7%	Economic development – 15/4%	Environmental – 10/3%	
Highway/DPW – 25/7%	COG – 14	Outdoor recreation – 9/2%	

3. How often have you worked with Tug Hill Commission staff (or circuit riders) in the last five years? (# of responses/% of respondents)

Frequently – 95/45%	Occasionally – 97/46%	Not at all – 20/9%
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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? (E=Essential, I=Important, NI=Not Important, DK=Don't Know, % of respondents)

	<i>E</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>NI</i>	<i>DK</i>
Workshops to increase local officials’ skills including annual Local Government Conference	66%	32%	0%	1%
Helping communities find money for water, sewer, housing, and similar grants and loans	66%	31%	1%	2%
Land use planning assistance to towns and villages	60%	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)	59%	38%	0%	3%
Helping communities protect the environment	45%	51%	1%	2%
Helping communities find money for parks, recreation, downtown revitalization	56%	38%	2%	4%
Helping towns and villages in solving day-to-day legal, accounting, computer, and similar problems	53%	34%	7%	6%
Circuit rider attendance at municipal board meetings	42%	49%	3%	5%
Educational programs to increase local citizens’ and children’s understanding of natural and cultural resources	34%	58%	6%	2%
Helping recreation trail development (skiing, ATV’s, snowmobiles, scenic highways, etc.)	29%	60%	8%	3%
Technical assistance to forest landowners and forest products businesses	30%	57%	5%	8%
Technical assistance to farmers and farm businesses	33%	51%	6%	11%
Technical assistance to chambers of commerce and similar groups	29%	54%	7%	10%

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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)*

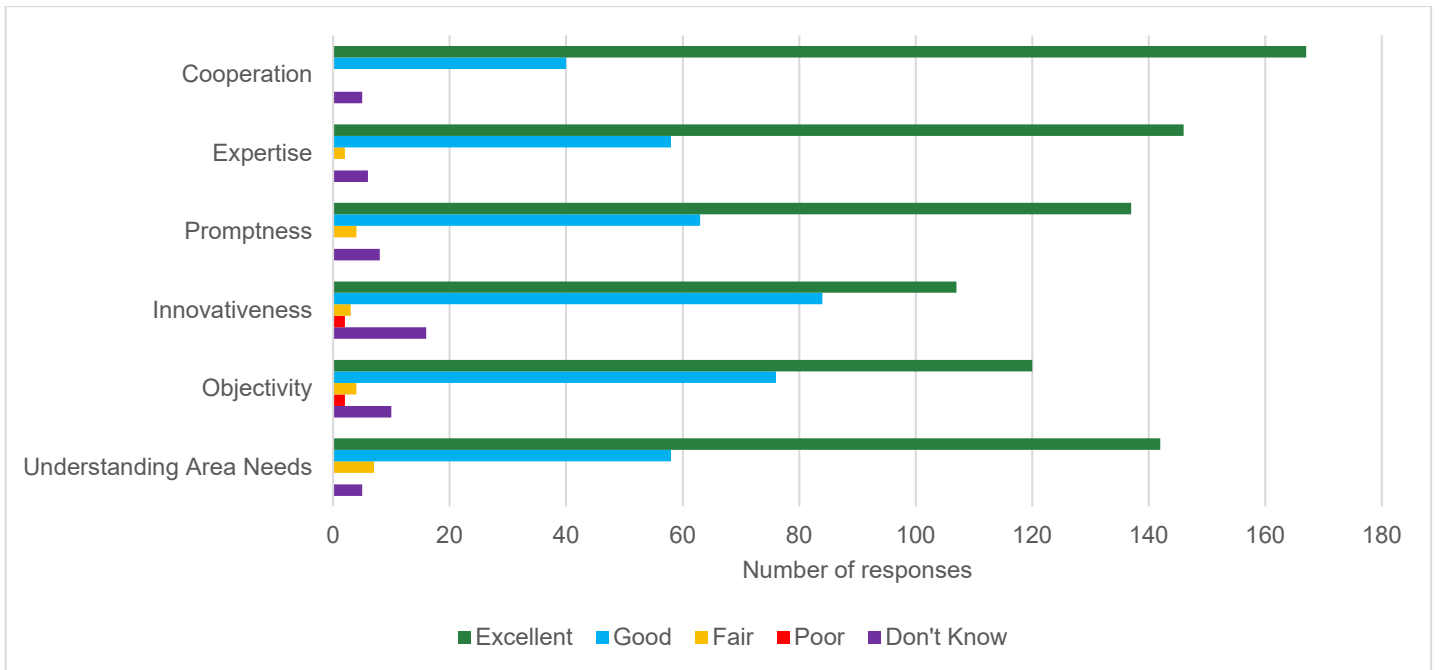
	<i>E</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>NEI</i>
Workshops to increase local officials' skills including annual Local	63%	28%	7%	0%	2%
Land use planning assistance to towns and villages	54%	33%	7%	0%	7%
Helping communities protect the environment	37%	48%	4%	0	11%
Support to groups of communities working together, especially local councils of governments (Cooperative Tug Hill Council, Northern Oneida County COG, North Shore COG, River Area COG and Salmon Rivers COG)	43%	41%	9%	0%	7%
Circuit rider attendance at municipal board meetings	52%	30%	2%	2%	13%
Helping communities find money for parks, recreation, downtown	35%	46%	2%	2%	15%
Helping recreation trail development (skiing, ATV's, snowmobiles, scenic	33%	46%	7%	0%	15%
Helping communities find money for water, sewer, housing, and similar	39%	39%	2%	2%	17%
Helping towns and villages in solving day-to-day legal, accounting, computer,	37%	39%	9%	0%	15%
Educational programs to increase local citizens' and children's understanding	26%	43%	9%	0%	22%
Technical assistance to chambers of commerce and similar groups	30%	37%	4%	0%	28%
Technical assistance to farmers and farm businesses	28%	33%	7%	0%	33%
Technical assistance to forest landowners and forest products businesses	28%	30%	9%	0%	33%

*Technical error caused this question to have a smaller sample size.

How would you rate the Tug Hill Commission on the following characteristics? (Please check only one for each category; % of respondents)

	<i>Excellent</i>	<i>Good</i>	<i>Fair</i>	<i>Poor</i>	<i>Don't Know</i>
Cooperation	79%	19%	0%	0%	2%
Expertise	69%	27%	1%	0%	3%
Understanding area needs	67%	27%	3%	0%	2%
Promptness	65%	30%	2%	0%	4%
Objectivity	57%	36%	2%	1%	5%
Innovativeness	50%	40%	1%	1%	8%

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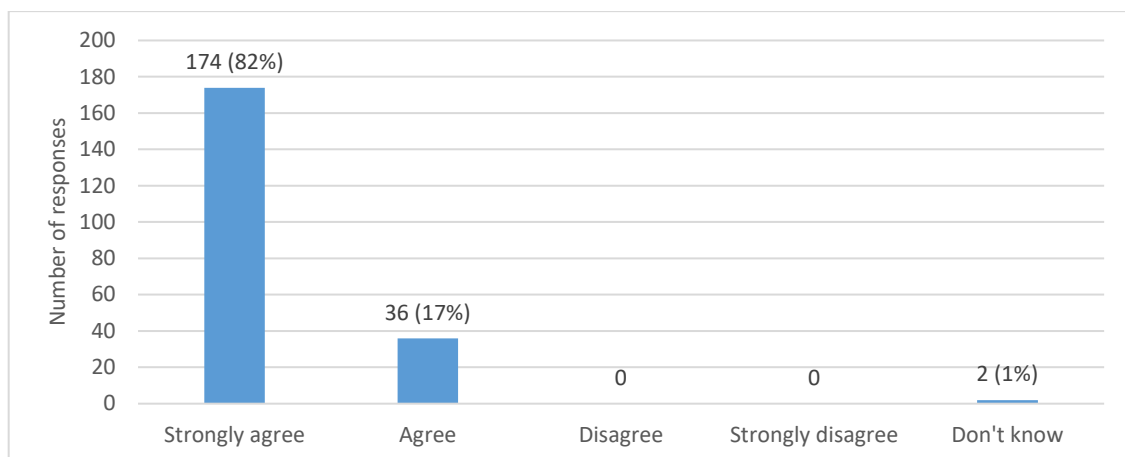


Section 3. Commission Role

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.)

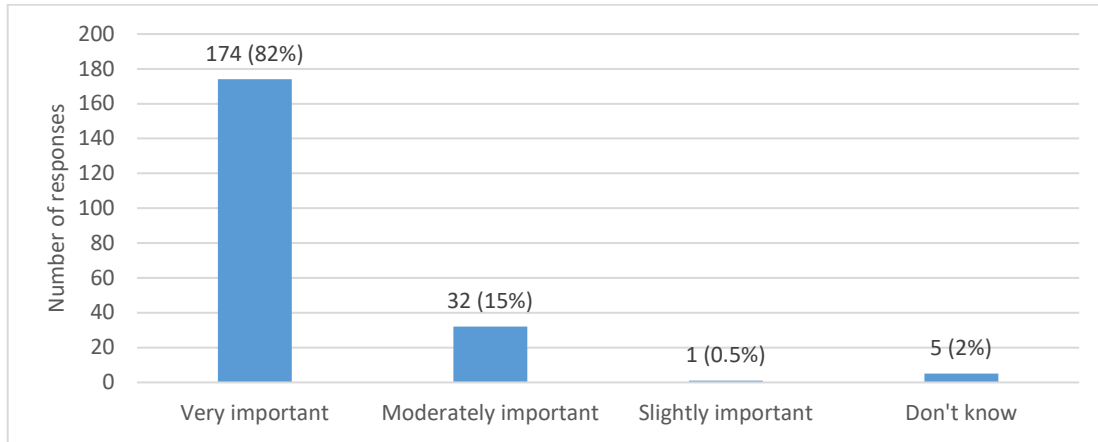
Strongly agree – 174/82%	Agree – 36/17%	Disagree – 0	Strongly disagree – 0	Don't know – 2/1%
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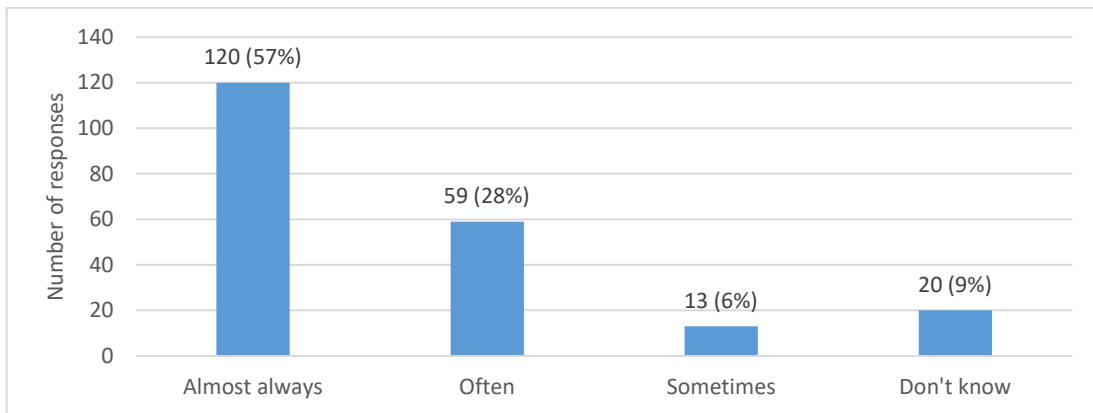
8. How important do you feel local control is to your community?

Very important – 174/82%	Moderately important – 32/15%	Slightly important – 1/0.5%	Don't know – 5/2%
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9. Does the Tug Hill Commission work to enhance local control?

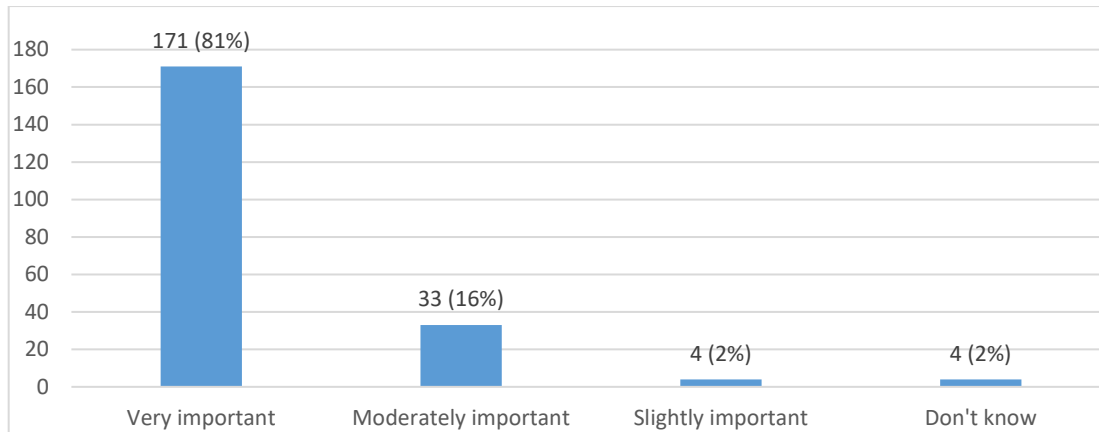
Almost always - 120/57%	Often – 59/28%	Sometimes – 13/6%	Don't know – 20/9%
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10. How important do you think intermunicipal cooperation and planning are to the Tug Hill Region?

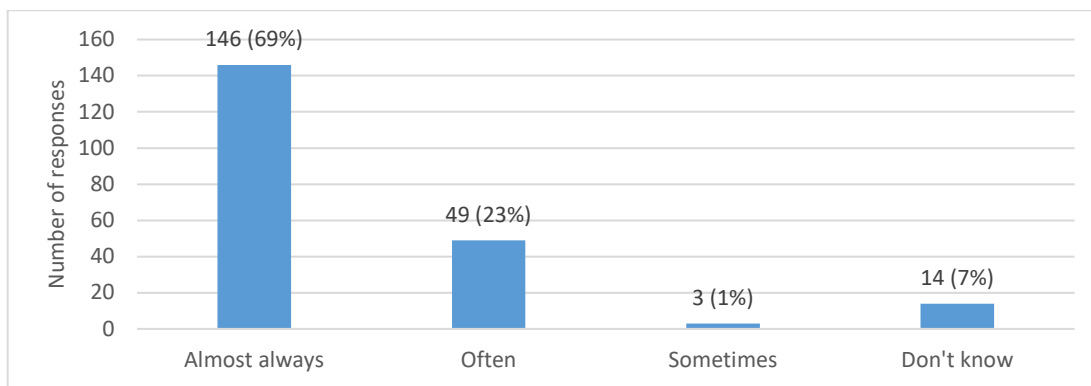
Very important 171/81%	Important 33/16%	Slightly important 4/2%	Don't know – 4/2%
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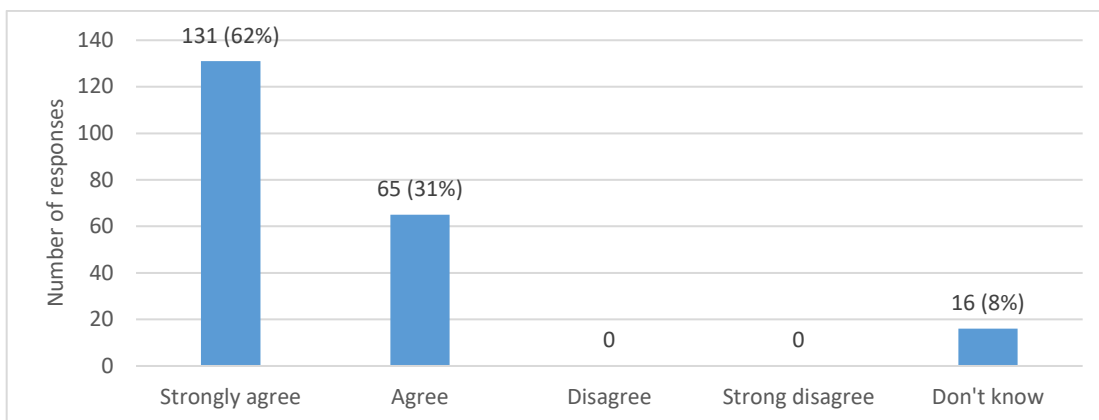
11. Does the Tug Hill Commission work effectively to support cooperation and planning?

Almost always - 146/69%	Often – 49/23%	Sometimes – 3/1%	Don't know – 14/7%
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12. "The Tug Hill Commission provides services which local governments need and cannot afford by themselves."

Strongly agree – 131/62%	Agree – 65/31%	Disagree – 0	Strongly disagree - 0	Don't know – 16/8%
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Appendix B: 2023 Tug Hill Commission Outside Region Policy

TUG HILL COMMISSION OUTSIDE REGION POLICY

WHEREAS, in 1998 Article 37, §847 of Executive Law was enacted to ensure the continued municipal assistance, conservation, preservation and development in the region by continuing the Tug Hill Commission permanently; and

WHEREAS, the legislature found, in §847, among other things:

- State assistance through the Tug Hill Commission to help Tug Hill local governments and organizations, those located in the area the legislation describes as “lying between Lake Ontario, the Black River and Oneida Lake” being “a region of approximately twenty-one hundred square miles that encompasses towns and villages scattered in a vast acreage of forest and farmland”, is merited and needed because of the importance of these resources to the state, and because of the small population and relative poverty of the region,
- The purpose of the commission is to enable local governments, private organizations, and individuals to shape the future of the Tug Hill region, and to demonstrate and communicate ways that this can be done by other rural areas. Commission programs are geared toward the conservation and productive use of the natural resources of the region, strengthening of the long-term economy, employment, cultural and social resources, and the general well-being of the rural communities,
- The commission has facilitated local action as 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; and

WHEREAS, the legislature established, in §847-c, powers and duties for the Commission. Among them are the power:

- to stimulate action by public and private organizations on region wide issues, problems and opportunities that affect the Tug Hill region, with primary emphasis on possible solutions at the local level,
- to assist local governments and other appropriate state and local organizations to plan and work for a positive future, and to do this, as far as possible, through intermunicipal cooperation and through technical assistance,
- to serve a coordinating role in utilizing the capabilities of other organizations to carry out the duties prescribed in this section; and

WHEREAS, the Tug Hill Commission delivers its services primarily through regional councils of governments (COGs), which currently are the Cooperative Tug Hill Council, the North Shore Council of Governments, the

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Northern Oneida County Council of Governments, the River Area Council of Governments; and the Salmon Rivers Council of Governments; and

WHEREAS, the Tug Hill Commission's financial and staff resources are finite and currently used to the fullest extent with the fifty-nine (59) towns and villages within the legislatively defined region, and the five (5) additional communities that have joined regional COGs; and

WHEREAS, additional municipalities within the region set out in §847-a of the Commission's enabling legislation have expressed interest in joining COGs;

NOW BE IT RESOLVED

1. As found by the New York State Legislature in the Commission's enabling legislation, municipalities within in the area described in §847-a are of similar nature and share natural resources, particularly watersheds; and
2. With additional financial resources to support the salaries, benefits and associated non-personal expenses for five permanent full time equivalent staff members, the commission would be willing to serve additional communities between the commission's current boundary to the Lake Ontario shoreline, and directly adjacent to the commission's current boundary on the east of the Black River, totaling no more than 16 towns and villages, if those communities request membership and are accepted by a COG; and
3. Until such time that additional financial resources are made available, the commission will not be able to provide more than minimal direction and assistance, as currently provided, to any additional outside region communities.

Approved at the December 11, 2023 Tug Hill Commission board meeting.