

NEW YORK STATE TUG HILL COMMISSION

HEADWATERS

2023 NEWSLETTER & 2023-2024 ANNUAL REPORT, ISSUE 60

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ABOUT HEADWATERS:

Headwaters is the annual newsletter report of the NYS Tug Hill Commission. The uniqueness of the Tug Hill region and its natural resources were recognized by New York State in the early 1970s when it created the Tug Hill Commission.

The commission uses a grassroots approach considered a model for fostering environmental protection and appropriate rural economic development in a way that retains “home rule” by local government. The commission provides assistance to the region’s towns and villages and helps them with their day-to-day issues. This, in turn, leverages conservation and sustainable development that benefits the communities and state as a whole.

The Tug Hill Commission is a state funded, regional agency overseen by a board of nine unpaid commissioners - two each from Jefferson, Lewis, Oneida, and Oswego counties, and one at-large. Commissioners are appointed for five year terms: three each by the Governor, State Senate, and State Assembly. The commission has an administrative link to New York State’s Department of State.

“HELPING LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND CITIZENS SHAPE THE FUTURE OF THE TUG HILL REGION”

Cover photo credit: George Grisham. Fish Creek.

COMMISSION BOARD



Left to right: Jan Bogdanowicz, Leona Cheresnoski, Mike Yerdon, Gerry Ritter, Tom Boxberger. Absent: Bill Scriber, Robert Keller.

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Left to right: Garbriel Yerdon, Matthew Smith, Paul Baxter, Chris Barboza, Mickey Dietrich, Angie Kimball, Taylor McKinney, John Healt, Matt Johnson, Katie Malinowski, Felicia Passino, Gwen Decker, Emily Fell, Jennifer Harvill.

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Tug Hill Sages left to right: Wayne McIlroy, Bob Quinn, Ben Coe, Loretta Lepkowski, Wayne Kwasniewski, Art Baderman, Rip Colesante, and Fran Yerdon.



Tug Hill Commission Celebrates 50 Years

Tailwater Lodge in Altmar hosted the Tug Hill Commission's 2023 annual meeting, Park It: Tug Hill video premiere, and designation of new Tug Hill Sages.

Friends of the Tug Hill Commission from near and far joined together on October 19 to celebrate 50 years of "helping local governments and citizens shape the future of the Tug Hill region." Almost 150 people, including board members, staff, alumni, Tug Hill Sages, and local, regional, and state partners, enjoyed a fun-filled evening at Tailwater Lodge in Altmar. The evening began with the premier of the brand new "Park It: Tug Hill" video produced by WPBS-TV, exploring the variety of four-season recreational activities available to residents of and visitors to Tug Hill. Following the video, attendees socialized while enjoying music by the NYS Old Tyme Fiddlers Association.

Led by Chairman Jan Bogdanowicz and Executive Director Katie Malinowski,

several individuals made remarks before dinner, including former executive directors John Bartow, Bob Quinn, and Ben Coe. The commission was also honored with a

The commission board and staff look forward to another 50 years of helping local governments and citizens shape the future of the Tug Hill region.

proclamation and resolution from Senator Mannion and Senator Walczyk and well-wishes from the remainder of the Tug Hill legislative delegation. Roger Maciejko was recognized for his 27 years as a Tug Hill Commissioner, having stepped down from the board earlier this year.

After dinner, the Class of 2023 Tug Hill Sages

was announced. Sages from prior years – Bob Sauer, Fran Yerdon, and Ben Coe – were joined by: Art Baderman, Rodman; Rip Colesante, Constantia; Wayne Kwasniewski, Lewis; Wayne McIlroy, Carthage; Loretta Lepkowski, Chases Lake; and Bob Quinn, Sackets Harbor.

The commission would not have lasted 50 years without the grassroots support of the region's towns, villages, and councils of governments. The board and staff look forward to decades more of working collaboratively to problem solve and create opportunities for improved quality of life for Tug Hill residents, and providing an example to other rural parts of New York State. ■



The Glenfield & Western Railroad presentation in West Leyden.

Training Opportunities

In 2023, the commission provided 11 municipal training opportunities, three presentations focusing on cultural and historical enrichment, and two sessions in the general interest category. Many were presented in a “hybrid” format, offering opportunities to attend both in-person and online. Almost all were presented in cooperation with outstanding partners and subject-matter experts.

The training season kicked off in January with “Snow Ridge: Through the Years” presented by Nancy Grisham, daughter of the first owners of Snow Ridge; Bronny Davis and Jerry Britton, authors of *White Magic: The Story of Snow Ridge Ski Area*; Tom Smith, former Snow Ridge racer and coach; and Nick Mir, current Snow Ridge owner and general manager. The presentation was rich with the history of skiing, the people that developed the sport, and the abundant

snow that supported it.

In July, the Friends of the Black River hosted “Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg Nation – Friends of The Black River Presentation” presented by Chief Laurie Carr and Professor Chad Cowie. In October, over 150 people were treated to a presentation by local history enthusiast Charlie Sweredoski about the Glenfield and Western Railroad and the historic Page settlement.

In December, the commission and partners presented a workshop on forest carbon credits for small landowners. Speakers from The Nature Conservancy, American Forestry Foundation, and Jefferson County Soil and Water Conservation District explained the forest carbon credit market and how a pilot program is working in Jefferson County.

The flagship Tug Hill Local Government Conference (LGC) was held at Turning Stone Event Center in April. For the first time, the LGC became a two-day event with an afternoon-before drone session presented by the Genesis Group. Participants learned about drone regulations, uses, and pilot requirements, and were given the chance to fly drones. The session

was followed by an evening reception, and the full day of training was held the following day.

Nearly 100 people attended the Black River Watershed Conference held in June at Zero Dock Street in Carthage. Centered around water quality topics, this annual event, organized in cooperation with the Lewis County Soil and Water Conservation District, attracts attendees from both within the region and across the north country and state.

In November, an infrastructure funding roundtable workshop was held at the Jefferson Lewis BOCES Howard G. Sackett Technical Center. Sponsored by the Syracuse University Environmental Finance Center, River Area Council of Governments (RACOG), Tug Hill Commission, and Lewis County Planning, the workshop taught participants about funding opportunities for safe and clean water management and other community investments. Individual consultations were also available to address specific project funding questions and needs. A new quick guide for town boards on special district formation was also unveiled.

Laird Petrie presented three municipal workshops this year. Two were identical workshops on town budgeting for highways and the other was an introduction to municipal accounting. The Association of Towns of the State of New York presented a webinar for newly elected town officials which included ethics training and additional town-specific subject matter. In November, Scott Steiger from SUNY Oswego presented findings from his research on lake effect lightning, and an economic visioning summit sponsored by RACOG was held in April.

Additionally, local watershed input sessions allowed residents, municipal officials and others to provide feedback and ideas. Tug Hill staffers facilitated stakeholder outreach on three different watershed planning projects: the Black River Adaptive Management project, the Sandy Creeks 9E Plan development, and the Oneida Lake 9E Plan update. ■



From left: Nick Mir, Tom Smith, Taylor McKinney, Bronny Davis, Jerry Britton, Nancy Grisham at Snow Ridge.



Laird Petrie presenting on highway budgets in Adams.

2023-24 Commission Funding

The Tug Hill Commission's state general fund appropriation increased by \$71,000 in Fiscal Year 2023-24, the first increase in five years. Most of the commission's funding comes from its annual state appropriation, but also includes a special revenue appropriation of \$50,000. Approximately 90% of the budget is spent on salaries, with the balance covering operating expenses.

In 2023-24, staff trained more than 1,600 local officials and others using Zoom virtual webinars as well as in-person trainings. The Local Government Conference was well attended at Turning Stone Conference Center in April. Staff began work on 42 new projects across the region, made progress on 35 ongoing projects, and responded to numerous technical

assistance requests.

Staff continued working with state agency partners on a variety of statewide priorities and initiatives, which include renewable energy, shared services, broadband, and recreation. A new partnership with the Governor's Traffic Safety Committee secured additional personal and non-personal services funding to augment the commission's traditional general fund allocation.

The commission employed 13 people - four circuit riders for the region's five councils of governments, and nine staff members provide program and support at the commission's Watertown office. ■



Left to right: Katie Malinowski, Caroline Maciejko, Roger Maciejko, Jan Bogdanowicz, honoring Roger's 27 years as a commissioner.

- COUNCILS OF GOVERNMENTS REPORTS -

COUNCIL GEOGRAPHY

There are five councils of governments (COGs) in the Tug Hill region. These independent intermunicipal organizations are supported with staff from the Tug Hill Commission and local government dues. Currently 55 of the 59 towns and villages within the region belong to a COG.

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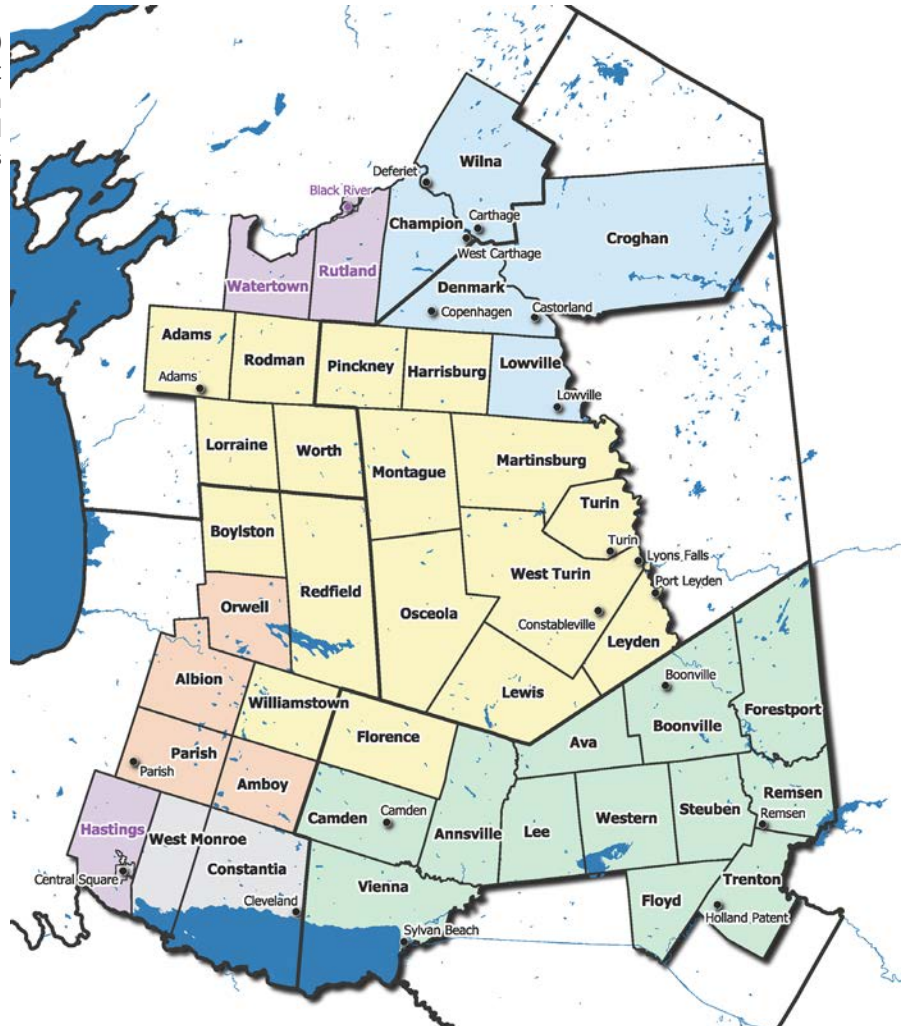
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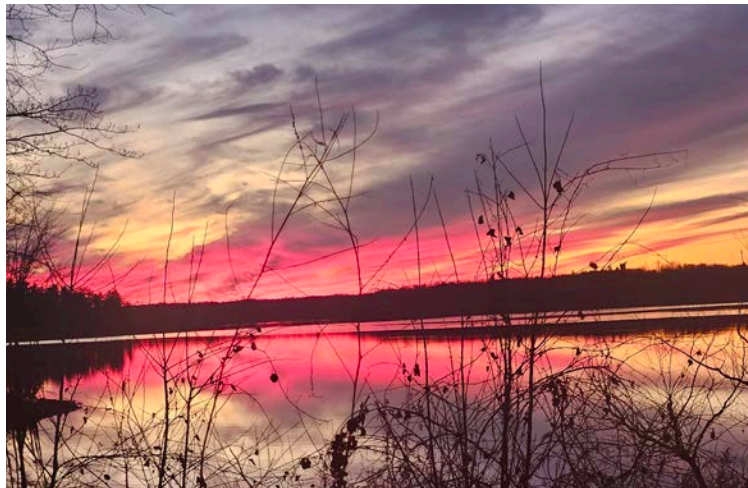
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UNAFFILIATED



COOPERATIVE TUG HILL COUNCIL



Salmon River Reservoir.

Five towns - Boylston, Florence, Harrisburg, Osceola, and Williamstown - adopted mini comprehensive plans in 2023, drawn from years of Cooperative Tug Hill Council (CTHC) shared planning work. Lewis and Martinsburg will next review their plans for approval. Rodman is working on a comprehensive plan and some towns are discussing a more in-depth comprehensive plan following mini comp plan approval. Redfield and Lorraine are updating their official town road maps and will follow with low volume and minimum maintenance road maps to describe their town-wide road systems. More work on these council-wide projects will continue in 2024.

CTHC municipalities have also been busy with code work. Osceola updated their zoning and subdivision laws. Constableville is working to create their first zoning law and has formed a zoning commission to start the process. Several other municipalities are working on renewable energy local laws or updates to their zoning laws for this and seasonal use regulation.

The effort to get statewide legislation approved to allow for the minimum maintenance classification of roads by amending state Highway Law was unsuccessful again in 2023. However, legislation granting this power to the town of Lorraine was approved, see page 8. Looking forward, successful implementation in Lorraine will hopefully set the stage for either statewide bill approval or adding more towns to the new

Highway Law Section 205-c, as this remains a priority for CTHC municipalities. Road issues abound in the council's towns, including individuals attempting to remove snow from town roads, requests for increased winter maintenance on unplowed roads, road damage from recreational events, and much more.

A new wind project, proposed by SWEB Development, is in the early stages in Worth. A fall open house was held to update the community on progress to date and provide a tentative timeline for the permitting application and project construction. The Number Three wind project completed construction in 2023 and came online. The Deer River wind project continues to finalize.

Meeting coverage of the CTHC municipalities is completed with help from associate circuit riders Beth Sterria-Rush and Christine Healt, with assistance from Heidi Tompkins, who the CTHC shares with the Salmon Rivers and North Shore COGs. ■

RIVER AREA COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

The River Area Council of Governments (RACOG) completed its promotional video in early 2023 with CGI Company, viewable on the RACOG website. The second annual RACOG Economic Visioning Summit was held at the Jefferson Lewis BOCES Howard G. Sackett Technical Center in April. Fort Drum interns Christopher Barboza and Kristle Hinola assisted with the event, which focused on projects and partnership opportunities. There were presenters from the Lewis County Chamber of Commerce, CREG Systems, Lewis County Planning, MRB Group, Maple Ridge Center, NYSERDA, Tug Hill Commission, Wilna, and Jefferson Lewis BOCES. Discussions stemming from the summit highlighted the need for a BOCES program to train students to become certified water and wastewater treatment operators. This program is nearly ready to launch. Massena Highway Superintendent Marty Miller also spoke about how that village has implemented an in-house CDL training.

In 2023, RACOG also saw the completion of its complete streets projects through the Fort Drum Regional Health Organization with the installation of the Carthage Park boardwalk. The boardwalks were assembled by BOCES students and installed with the help of the Home Depot Foundation. Several volunteers from Home Depot, along with Tug Hill Commission interns, the RACOG circuit rider, and Carthage DPW assisted.

RACOG also held an infrastructure roundtable workshop in November with assistance from the Tug Hill Commission and the Syracuse University Environmental Finance Center. There were several funding agencies present. Some additional discussion took place with NYS Department of State about having a student activity day to get youth involved with local government. A group of interested parties are working on this right now.

The town of Wilna, and the villages of Carthage and Deferiet started a joint comprehensive plan in 2023, with work on a second comprehensive plan starting between the town of Denmark and the villages of Castorland and Copenhagen.

RACOG also secured its first contracted associate circuit rider, former Fort Drum intern Chris Barboza, who has now taken a full-time position with the Tug Hill Commission. Amber Swan has now taken over as the associate circuit rider for 2024. ■



From left to right: Chris Barboza and Kristle Hinola.

NORTH SHORE COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

In 2023, the North Shore Council of Governments (NorCOG) undertook a major study of member municipalities and their resilience and recovery from recent economic challenges. The need was amplified by Micron Technology's October 2022 announcement of plans to build a large semiconductor manufacturing plant in nearby Clay, expected to add billions in economic output to the region. NorCOG contracted with the MRB Group to conduct the study. The MRB Group was familiar with the Tug Hill region, having conducted a multi-municipality study for West Carthage, Carthage, Wilna, and Champion in 2022/23.

The NorCOG study started in summer 2023, and included a survey and analysis of existing reports and plans; a community meeting and

a community survey; a business survey, interviews with local businesses, and market analysis; and several steering committee meetings. The final study report was finalized in February and is available on the NorCOG website.

As a follow-up to the 2022 traffic study performed for the portion of the North Shore within the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council area, NorCOG submitted a proposal for a follow-up study to include not just traffic data, but additional elements including accidents, design elements, and projected needs. Such a study would take into account the potential impact of growth resulting from the Micron semiconductor manufacturing plant development taking place over the next several years.

The town of Constantia completed and adopt-



NorCOG meeting in West Monroe.

ed an update to its town-wide comprehensive plan in 2023, with the assistance of the Tug Hill Commission. ■

NORTHERN ONEIDA COUNTY COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

The NOCCOG GPS mapping program continued in 2023 in the village of Camden and towns of Annsville, Remsen, Trenton, and Western. Trails were mapped to assist with a grant application in Trenton, and measurements between a sand and salt shed and the neighboring Mohawk River were also part of the mapping completed in Western.

NOCCOG helped to sponsor training in 2023, including a webinar stressing the importance of transferring knowledge within municipalities, a highway budget/town board training, and a "Newly Elected" webinar.

Vienna leads the charge in expanding the broadband infrastructure in northern Oneida County and was one of the only towns to dedicate ARPA funding towards broadband expansion. The town of Boonville will also see broadband expand in their community. Water infrastructure

and wastewater treatment improvements are taking place in Forestport and the village of Camden. Floyd is in the process of a town-wide water meter replacement.

The town of Camden is working on a revised comprehensive plan, and numerous other municipalities including Forestport, Boonville (both town and village), and Remsen are in progress. Many plans include addressing renewable energy development. Ava completed their community playground and Western completed their town-wide reassessment.

NOCCOG helped to bring five students and two teachers to the 2023 Tug Hill Local Government Conference. Additionally, 2023 marked the start of the annual scholarship program, which will award three area graduates \$500 each after the successful completion of their first semester.

Associate advisors Lisa Bellinger and Joe Row-



Mural in Camden.

lands are invaluable members of the NOCCOG team. ■

SALMON RIVER COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

2023 saw the first change in the membership of the Salmon Rivers Council of Governments (SRCG) in ten years, since the dissolution of Altmar in 2013. The council voted unanimously to accept the application of the village of Pulaski as a member. Although the village is not a municipality within the defined statutory boundaries of the Tug Hill Commission region, the council is not bound by that limitation to its membership.

The town of Orwell continues to make progress toward development of an alternate water system.

The town of Parish took significant steps in 2023 toward renovations to the town park, known as Merrill Park. In April, the town board did a walkthrough of the park grounds and facilities, and work performed later in the year

included improvements to the town basketball courts and tennis courts.

The village of Parish has continued to pursue a public water system. In December, the village received notification from the NYS Environmental Facilities Corporation that they had been awarded a \$5,000,000 grant through the NYS Water Infrastructure Improvement Act program.

The village has also sought aid for needed improvements to their wastewater treatment system, and December brought a \$1,065,000 grant toward that purpose, also through NYSEFC's Water Infrastructure Improvement Act program. ■



Parish town board at Merrill Park.



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Lorraine Minimum Maintenance Home Rule Bill Signed Into Law

Governor Hochul signed bill A6412/S6249, sponsored by Senator Mark Walczyk and Minority Leader Will Barclay, in December 2023. The law amends Highway and Vehicle and Traffic Law to establish minimum maintenance roads in designated towns, in this case Lorraine, Jefferson County. It codifies into state law the same process that towns across NYS have been following, under their home rule authority for decades to designate low volume and minimum maintenance roads. The law goes into effect 120 days after it was signed, and expires after eight years. This new law is the result of decades of efforts by towns, councils of governments, partner organizations, and state legislators.

The Governor's support memo states "This bill will authorize a process by which the town of Lorraine, in Jefferson County, may designate roads with low volumes of traffic as *minimum maintenance roads*, not requiring snow and ice removal or other maintenance. I support the goals of this legislation, which would allow the town of Lorraine to grant this designation to certain roads, helping farmland and forestland, encourage outdoor winter recreation, and help localities manage road maintenance budgets."

Lorraine is 39 square miles in size with a 2020 population of 924. Total town road mileage is approximately 36.4 miles, with about 15 miles designated minimum maintenance. Twenty per-

cent of the land in Lorraine is state forest, and of the town's minimum maintenance road mileage, 6.5 miles has state land on one or both sides. In 2020, the town's budget was approximately \$1.4 million, and 75% of that was spent on highway management.

Several minimum maintenance town roads in Lorraine provide critical access to the 9,233-acre Winona State Forest. These roads are unpaved, providing access to the area by motor vehicle in the summer, and access to the area via skis, snowmobiles, dog sleds, snowshoes, and fat bikes in the winter. ■