



NYS Tug Hill Commission Strategic Plan 2025-2029



Adopted at the March 17, 2025 Tug Hill Commission Board Meeting

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Cover photo by Jillian Lee, at the north end of the Tug Hill Traverse Trail, June 2025.

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Introduction

The mission of the NYS Tug Hill 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, per Article 37 of NYS Executive Law. The commission achieves this mission through programs that are geared toward the conservation and productive use of the natural resources of the region, strengthening the long-term economy, employment, cultural and social resources, and the general well-being of the rural communities.

The beauty and challenge for the Tug Hill Commission to be successful in that mission while operating as a state-funded agency with no regulatory authority. The commission is charged with balancing environmental conservation and natural resources protection in a place strongly tied to home rule authority and that is often skeptical of the overreach of big government. Board and staff must balance the need to comply with and support Albany initiatives and expectations while holding true to its grassroots approach to problem-solving and without overstepping locally driven priorities. This paradox can play out in tensions between “top down” priorities generated in more populated areas, which oftentimes do not translate well in the rural portions of the state. Maintaining this equilibrium plays out on many levels, from the commission board, to staff, to councils of governments and individual towns and villages. With the high value placed by the commission on positive, productive working relationships with area counties, non-profit organizations, fellow state agencies and other partners, it makes for both an overwhelmingly rewarding and sometimes challenging place to serve.



Process and Inputs

Since 1996, the commission has created five -year strategic plans. This plan is the seventh. The strategic planning process formally kicked off in August 2024 at a facilitated day-long retreat with Dr. Richard Halpin, which included the commission board, staff, attorney and associates. A small working group of staff took the results of that strategy session to develop a draft plan based on careful review of prior commission strategic plans, the most recent local leaders' survey (2023), and several brainstorming sessions. After input from the board and all staff, a second, refined draft was shared with the region's five councils of governments for their input. A subcommittee of the commission board also met twice to review each draft in detail. Finally, a third and final draft was approved at the March 17, 2025 meeting of the Tug Hill Commission board.

Historically, one of the lowest rated characteristics of the Tug Hill Commission in the local leaders' survey is innovativeness. This strategic plan tries to remedy that to some extent, but also acknowledges that the implementation of the more innovative items will only occur with buy-in and support from our partners.

The following action plan matrix tables are organized by the commission's powers and duties outlined in Article 37 of NYS Executive Law. Some parts of this law are so ingrained in the way the commission works that they are not listed as separate objectives. Examples include developing agreements with partners to provide staff services – this is core to the reciprocal relationship between the commission and the region's councils of governments and provision of circuit riders.

Action Plan Matrix

OBJECTIVE #1: Prepare, publish, and disseminate information or reports to highlight for state agencies, local governments, and the general public issues, problems, and opportunities relevant to the Tug Hill region, in concert with state and federal agencies and others.

Strategy	Actions	Lead and Partners	Priority	Timing	Measures of Success
Technical Paper Publication	Write new/update existing technical papers on topics relevant to Tug Hill. Issue press releases on new technical papers	Program and circuit rider staff at the Tug Hill Commission (THC) lead writing and engage partners as needed by topic	High	Annual	• Maintain five-year review cycle for existing papers • Author at least two new papers per year • Implement metric on website to track downloads
Issue Paper Publication	Write new/update existing issue papers on topics relevant to Tug Hill. Issue press releases on new issue papers	Program and circuit rider staff at THC lead writing and engage partners as needed by topic	High	Annual	• Maintain five-year review cycle for existing papers • Author at least two new papers per year • Implement metric on website to track downloads
Tug Hill Times Publication	Create and publish newsletter to share information on projects, partners, grant opportunities, training opportunities.	THC	High	Bi-weekly	Number of Tug Hill Times published annually.
Improve Communication	Expand and integrate communication systems to increase efficiency and effectiveness	THC	High	Annual	Integration of email, social media, website.
Decennial Tug Hill Landowners and Residents Survey	Conduct third survey building on surveys from 2009 and 2019	THC and JCC Center for Community Studies	Medium	Next survey in 2029	Complete survey, compare to previous survey results, create summary and disseminate.

OBJECTIVE #2: Stimulate action by public and private organizations on regionwide issues, problems and opportunities that affect the Tug Hill region, with primary emphasis on possible solutions at the local level and with attention to the ways in which information developed and experience gained in the Tug Hill region may be usefully shared elsewhere in NYS.

Strategy	Actions	Lead and Partners	Priority	Timeframe	Measures of Success
Participate on statewide committees	Continue membership on Open Space, GIS Advisory, NYSEERDA; DEC reforestation LTAP; look for new opportunities.	THC	High	Annual review	Actively participate in at least five statewide committees per year.
Present at external conferences	Connect with partners and event hosts to present where Tug Hill staff has relevant experience and expertise.	THC, working with partners including DOS, AOT, NYCOM, NYPF	Medium	Annual review	Five staff present at conferences/events per year.
Work more directly with conservation, forestry and agricultural partners	Work with THTLT to host a Tug Hill Retreat to brainstorm innovative ways to promote working forest lands. Increase project involvement in agriculture.	THTLT, OSI, TNC, SWCDs, The Conservation Fund, CCEs, SWCDs, AFT	Medium	Annual review	Retreat held, information shared with TH communities and forest owners. Collaborate on at least one ag-related project per year.
Facilitate discussions about balance of development and natural resource conservation	Help organize a symposium for municipalities on Micron development. Engage with wildlife connectivity partners on projects.	THC, THTLT, SCI, A2A, Municipalities, County Planning, TNC	Medium	Biannual review	Incorporate up to date information on wildlife connectivity and sustainable development in advisory content for municipalities. Relay sustainable renewable energy development information.
Resurrect Tug Hill Local Leaders Institute	Review previous materials, refresh on what our counties are doing, confirm	THC, COGs	Low	Once in next five years	Level of participation, post-institute surveys of participants.

	that ours would be different than what is already offered.				
Engage with educational institutions to undertake Tug Hill specific research	Develop and maintain relationships with university partners to conduct research on Tug Hill regional and community projects.	THC, SUNY Oswego, SUNY Oneonta, SUNY ESF, Syracuse University, SUNY Poly, JCC, others	Low	Annual review	Seek to engage with one educational institution on a collaborative project, annually.

Objective 3: 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, including planning assistance.

Strategy	Actions	Lead and Partners	Priority	Timing	Measures of Success
Comprehensive Plan Development	Develop plans for municipalities that do not have 'modern' plans.	THC and Municipalities	High	Ongoing	Community needs met.
Zoning Law Development	Develop laws for municipalities that do not have any zoning.	THC and Municipalities	High	Ongoing	Community needs met.
Comp Plan and Zoning Law amendments to address new factors	Amend plans and laws for municipalities that have newer documents, but face growth or new uses.	THC and Municipalities	High	Ongoing	Community needs met.
Support the development and implementation of COG strategic plans	NorCOG Economic Resilience and Recovery Plan; CTHC Special Areas/Resource Management Plan.	THC staff and circuit riders	High	Ongoing	Plan implemented to extent possible.

Resurrect comp plan strategies tracking and proactive outreach to communities on projects	Update document as comp plans are adopted and publish for staff use.	Dedicated THC staff member	High	Ongoing	Up to date document.
Cooperative ZBAs	Include municipalities that need a ZBA, but cannot field individual board.	THC staff and CRs	High	Ongoing	Community needs met.

Objective 4: 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, including legal assistance.

Strategy	Actions	Lead and Partners	Priority	Timing	Measures of Success
Collaborate on state policy and proposed legislation as requested by communities and COGs	As requested, take legislative asks to the region's state legislators and Governor's office and work on potential legislation.	THC; Governor's Office; State Legislators	High	Annual	Legislation proposed. Legislation enacted.
Continue contracts with outside experts (planning, legal, fiscal) as necessary	Contract with Laird Petrie, Phil Street, Ayers Law Firm and others as needed to meet community demands.	THC and contractors	High	As needed	Contracts secured and deliverables provided.

Objective 5: 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, including training.

Strategy	Actions	Lead and Partners	Priority	Timing	Measures of Success
Tug Hill Local Government Conference Continuation	Organize and implement improvements to annual LGC, to increase Tug Hill community participation.	THC and COGs	High	Annually	Number of attendees total; by COG.
Stand-alone workshops and webinars for skills development and issue education	Deliver workshops and webinars on topics relevant to Tug Hill.	THC and COGs	High	Review annually	Number of workshops and webinars held.
5.C Maintain and improve Tug Hill staff expertise by attending training on a regular basis	Ensure that staff attend needed training on an annual basis.	THC	High	Annually	Number of trainings attended to keep up and learn new skills.
5.D Promote internal sharing of information, to seed ideas	Organize and implement 9 lunch and learns for staff per year.	THC staff and invited partners	Medium	Annually	Number of lunch and learns held; track topics and presenters.

Objective 6: 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, including citizen education and participation assistance

Strategy	Actions	Lead and Partners	Priority	Timing	Measures of Success
Work with youth to encourage the next generation of community leaders	Grow the CCSAP program to all four counties.	Tug Hill Commission and four county BOCES programs	Low	Complete Lewis County in May 2025; add an additional county each year	Lewis County completed. Other counties integrated.
Provide information to communities on strategies to keep and attract young families	1. Look for good examples of what other areas are doing and share info. 2. Incorporate into comprehensive plans when applicable.	THC	Low	Annually	Information provided.
6.C Promote best practices to local governments on encouraging productive citizen participation	Offer via training workshops or THT articles.	THC	Low	As able	Information provided.

Objective 7: 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, including assistance in preparation of grant applications to other entities.

Strategy	Actions	Lead and Partners	Priority	Timing	Measures of Success
Increase the number of grant applications written for towns and villages by 10% a year	Hold office hours around the regions for brainstorming Advertise this service better by creating a video and publicizing Google grants calendar Keep comp plan strategy matrix up to date and review quarterly at staff meetings	THC Staff	High	Review annually	Number of grants written. Success rate of grants.
Increase the number of grant applications written for non-profits entities in the region by 10% a year	Hold office hours Generate contact lists for other non-profits, such as fire departments, others.	THC Staff	High	Review annually	Number of grants written. Success rate of grants.
Provide more direct support on grant administration	Investigate options for contracting with a grant administrator.	THC and COGs	Low	As needed	Grant administrator secured.
Provide more direct support to municipalities on grant preparedness	"How to" materials on SAM, grants gateway, UEI's, incorporation dates and docs, maps.	THC	Medium	As needed	Informational materials provided.

Objective 8: To serve a coordinating role in utilizing the capabilities of other organizations to carry out the duties prescribed in this section.

Strategy	Actions	Lead and Partners	Priority	Timing	Measures of Success
Continue to support the region's councils of governments to implement their plans and priorities	Annual COG leaders meetings. Provide coordinator support to cooperative planning and zoning boards of appeal Other as identified.	THC and COGs	High	Annually	Meeting held. Cooperative boards supported.
Encourage SuperCOG meeting on biannual basis	Organize and hold SuperCOG meeting with agenda items that will generate interest and attendance.	THC and COGs	Medium	May 2025 and every two years after	Meeting held with participation by all COGs. New ideas or projects discussed, to give direction to THC and COGs.
Work with partners to write, update, and implement watershed plans.	Serve on all four county Water Quality Coordinating Committees Organize annual Black River Conference and newsletter. Participate on plan advisory committees	THC, WQCCs, SWCDs, others.	Medium	Annually	At least one watershed effort supported.
Leverage partnerships with regional entities	Serve on boards or committees; look for opportunities to involve them in THC efforts.	THC, ANCA, EFC, Sea Grant, WRI, Cornell Local Roads, MVEDD and others	Medium	Annually	Service on at least three boards annually.

Objective 9: Establish a central clearinghouse for technical studies, which may be used by members of the public, local governments, and state agencies in addressing state and regionwide resource conservation and development issues.

Strategy	Actions	Lead and Partners	Priority	Timing	Measures of Success
Create a section on THC website with old and new technical studies done by or sponsored by THC	Review archive documents and choose final versions of relevant reports and studies, upload to pdfs to the commission's publications page.	THC	Medium	Year 1 and then maintain	Section created and populated.
Create a partner tab on our website with links to often cited informational papers	Add organizations such as OSC, DOS Local Government, Cornell Local Roads Program, Association of Towns.	THC	Medium	Year 1 and then maintain	Partner tab created and populated.

Objective 10: To provide planning services in conjunction with county planning departments and regional planning boards

Strategy	Actions	Lead and Partners	Priority	Timeframe	Measures of Success
Keep in close communication with all county and regional planning agencies	Organize meetings with county planning departments and CNYRPDB at least twice a year to share information.	THC – assign a staff member to make sure that happens	High	Twice a year	Meetings held.
Provide technical assistance to	Offer Tug Hill staff assistance during meetings or as issues arise.	THC	Medium	As needed	Amount of technical assistance provided.

county planning departments					
Involve planning departments in THC training as presenters	Request planning department presenters as needed.	THC	Low	As needed	Number of county planning personnel involved in trainings.
Communicate and coordinate with regional planning boards statewide.	Reach out to regional planning boards to exchange ideas, promote innovation, collaboration, compare notes on training dates.	THC	Low	As needed	Meetings held.

Objective 11: To provide supplementary technical assistance and educational services through public or private groups

Strategy	Actions	Lead and Partners	Priority	Timeframe	Measures of Success
Continue to explore Tug Hill history and share with the public	Organize and sponsor at least two history workshops/webinars per year.	THC with historical societies, historians, private individuals	Medium	Annual	Number of history presentations held.
Partner with at least two groups a year to provide technical assistance outside our areas of expertise.	Work with partners to identify and deliver technical assistance to meet Tug Hill community needs.	THC with partners	Medium	Annual	Number of TA's provided.
Facilitate meetings, trainings, etc. that focus on conservation	Organize, sponsor, and/or participate in at least two conservation related meetings or trainings per year.	THC with partners such as SLELO, East Branch of Fish Creek Working Group, Woodsmen's Field Days	Medium	Annual	Number of meetings/trainings held.

Objective 12: To apply for and receive from the federal and state government and public and private agencies, funds to accomplish the purposes of the commission and to solicit, receive and utilize gifts and donations of any kind from any source

Strategy	Actions	Lead and Partners	Priority	Timing	Measures of Success
Continue Traffic Safety Coordinator	Work with DMV/GTSC to continue to secure funding if administrative hurdles can be overcome.	THC, DMV	Low	Annually	Process improved to allow continuance.
Use third-party funded agreements to bring necessary expertise to the region	Work with AFT to implement the current agreement on agrivoltaics.	THC, AFT	Medium	Annually	Number of third-party agreements secured.