

NEW YORK STATE TUG HILL COMMISSION

HEADWATERS

2024 NEWSLETTER & 2024-2025 ANNUAL REPORT, ISSUE 61

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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: Mickey Dietrich, Lowville.

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Front left to right: Tom Boxberger, Gerry Ritter, Leona Cheresnoski, Mike Yerdon. Back left to right: Bill Scriber, Jan Bogdanowicz, Robert Keller.

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Clockwise from top left: Staff hike Tug Hill Traverse with Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust; Association of Towns presents at the Tug Hill Local Government Conference; past executive directors recognized at annual dinner; Tug Hill board and staff meet with councils of governments leadership.

Partnerships Key to Tug Hill Commission Effectiveness

Working with partners at the local, regional, and state level was again a focus for the Tug Hill Commission in 2024. At the beginning of the year, the commission delivered its 2024 White Paper (the evaluation of the commission's programs and services undertaken every five years) to the Governor and Legislature. Based on the 2023 Tug Hill local leaders survey, all core programs – land use planning, training, grant writing, natural resource support, circuit rider services, and technical assistance – are rated 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.

Commission and councils of governments leadership held their annual meeting to review activities and identify priorities for the

upcoming year. Commission staff attended two events in Albany: the Rural Resources Fair organized by the Legislative Commission for Rural Resources, and Fort Drum Day, where the Army and civilian organizations provide information to Albany legislative leaders about the importance of Fort Drum to the north country and the nation. The Tug Hill region also hosted the 2024 NYS Association of Conservation Commissions Conference on the Environment, at which the commission was able to showcase its grassroots approach to engage, support, and assist community actions that balance conservation and rural development to a statewide audience.

The commission held its annual meeting near Port Leyden at the Hayloft at Moonshine Farm. Keynote speaker Katie Petronis, deputy commissioner for natural resources from the NYS Department of Environmental

Conservation addressed the gathering on a variety of topics relevant to Tug Hill.

The commission welcomed new board member Bob Keller, from Boonville, Oneida County, in April. The commission started 2025 with a new slate of officers. New chair Geraldine (Gerry) Ritter, from Forestport, Oneida County; new vice chair William (Bill) Scriber from Parish, Oswego County; and Tom Boxberger, from Watertown, Jefferson County, secretary, will serve two-year terms. The board and commission executive director Katie Malinowski extended sincere thanks to Jan Bogdanowicz and Mike Yerdon for their service as board chair and vice chair for the past 12 years. ■



Patrick Reynolds explains historical artifacts at the Oneida County History Center.

Community and Regional Efforts

High Demand for Planning Support

The commission's planning department had another very busy year in 2024. Work continued on several comprehensive (comp) plans. The town of Wilna and the villages of Carthage and Deferiet are winding up work on a joint plan, as are the town of Denmark and the villages of Castorland and Copenhagen. The towns of Camden and Rodman are in the adoption phase of their comp planning efforts while Albion and Ava are just beginning work. The town and village of Parish adopted a joint comp plan in the fall. The commission is also aiding the town and village of Boonville with a joint plan in partnership with a local consulting firm.

Assistance was given to many communities to update their zoning laws. These include: Deferiet, Florence, Lewis, Lowville (V), Redfield, Turin, Watertown, Western, and West Turin. Amending laws to include or update standards for the review of large scale solar and battery energy storage projects made up the bulk of this work.

Several municipalities have started work on their first-ever zoning laws. These include Constableville, Constantia, and Williamstown. The proposed Micron chip manufacturing facility in northern Onondaga County and its expected impacts on neighboring communities have many municipalities in the southeastern portion of the Tug Hill region thinking hard about

strengthening their land use planning programs.

Natural Resources Projects Progress

Staff continued to be involved with three watershed planning efforts: the Black River Adaptive Modeling project, the development of the Sandy Creeks 9 Element Plan, and the development of the Oneida Lake 9 Element Plan. Another successful Black River Watershed Conference was held at the View Arts Center, Old Forge in June. In the Little Salmon River watershed, the commission facilitated an informational meeting on issues surrounding dams and continues to work with municipalities, landowners, and the Syracuse University Engineers Without Borders Club, who in collaboration with

the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation and other partners, is completing engineered removal and alteration designs for two dams.

Three salt shed grant applications, and one park grant application were submitted through the state's consolidated funding application with commission help. Applications were submitted by the town of Lee for park upgrades, and for salt storage structures in the towns of Turin, Western, and West Turin. West Turin was awarded \$487,800 for a new structure.

Infrastructure Focus for Community Development

Projects staff were busy with town road mapping in 2024. This effort encourages towns to accurately map their roads in a georeferenced format to create a baseline record of their road inventory, improving their record-keeping and the ability to more effectively assess their road systems, obligations, and liabilities. The commission developed a one-page guide on steps municipalities can take to document and manage their road systems and will refine the guide as more information becomes available.

Traffic count data collected with the commission's MetroCount equipment, as well as crash data available through the commission's partnership with the Governor's Traffic Safety Committee, have proved useful for many communities to assist with planning, project development, and increasing traffic safety. ■



Board and staff retreat at Camp Zerbe in Oswego County.

COOPERATIVE TUG HILL COUNCIL

The Cooperative Tug Hill Council (CTHC) celebrated their 50th anniversary at their fall 2024 meeting. A brochure with facts, a timeline and other information was created for the event and is available on the CTHC website (www.tughillcouncil.com). Special recognition was given to Fran Yerdon from Osceola who was one of the original representatives on the Cooperative Tug Hill Planning Board (CTHC's predecessor) and who remains one of Osceola's representatives today!

Lewis, Montague, and Turin adopted mini land use plans, drawn from years of cooperative planning work. Work is ongoing with the village of Constableville to adopt a mini plan in conjunction with work on their first zoning law. Rodman is working with the Tug Hill planning staff on a full comprehensive plan as well. In early 2025,

Williamstown and Port Leyden will also begin work on their first zoning laws.

The Cooperative Tug Hill Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) has received requests to join from additional municipalities, which has resulted in the original Cooperative ZBA being split into two boards to accommodate the growth. The western board will be shared by Boylston, Florence, Osceola, and Redfield while the eastern board will have representatives from Constableville, Harrisburg, Montague, Pinckney, and Turin.

Lorraine, with help from the commission, has readopted their official road map and the local law allowing for the designation of low volume roads and continues through the process to re-implement minimum maintenance roads designations following the state legislation allowing this designation in their town. The towns of Red-

field and Turin have also adopted updated official road maps, and Turin has begun the process to implement minimum maintenance roads for the first time. ■



Fran Yerdon and Roger Tibbetts.

RIVER AREA COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

The River Area Council of Governments (RACOG) continued its growth in 2024 with the addition of the town of Watson, for a total of 12 member communities. To support this expansion, RACOG contracted with two associate circuit riders Paul Shepard and Patrick Brady, to attend meetings on evenings with multiple board meetings.

RACOG successfully hosted its third annual Economic Visioning Summit at the Carthage Elks Lodge, featuring presentations from various stakeholders. The fourth summit is scheduled for April 30, 2025, at the Jefferson-Lewis BOCES Howard G. Sackett Technical Center.

Recognizing the critical importance of youth engagement, RACOG, in collaboration with Jefferson-Lewis BOCES, local school districts, and the Tug Hill Commission, launched the Civic Service Student Activity Program (CSSAP) in 2024. This

program aims to foster civic awareness among young people. Jillian Lee, commission project specialist, facilitated the inaugural student learning day, and from this program, a student board was established to provide youth perspectives to RACOG. This board, currently comprised of four students, recently sent out a survey to their peers in RACOG school districts to gather valuable input.

Addressing a critical workforce need, RACOG, in partnership with the Tug Hill Commission, New York Water Environment Association, and Jefferson-Lewis BOCES, is developing local water/wastewater certification opportunities through BOCES. Additionally, RACOG, in collaboration with the commission's traffic safety coordinator, finalized a Traffic Safety Initiative Report to address concerns raised by member municipalities regarding pedestrian safety, speeding, and near-miss accidents.

The commission's planning department is actively involved in the development of two comprehensive plans. The joint plan for the town of Wilna and the villages of Carthage and Deferiet is nearing completion, while work on the joint plan for the town of Denmark and the villages of Castorland and Copenhagen is also progressing steadily. ■



Students creating a town budget.

SALMON RIVERS COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

The Salmon Rivers Council of Governments (SRCG) grew in 2024, when the council unanimously voted to welcome the town of Richland as a member. This came on the heels of the first change in the membership of SRCG in a decade when the village of Pulaski joined in 2023, following the dissolution of the village of Altmar in 2013. Although Richland lies outside the statutory boundaries of the Tug Hill Commission region, the council felt that given the commonalities between municipalities connected by the Salmon River, Richland's membership was a natural fit.

Pulaski and Richland are currently collaborating on a joint comprehensive plan. Pulaski has also been awarded a \$12.3 million grant and financing package through the Clean Water, Clean Air, and Green Jobs Environmental Bond Act of 2022 to support the replacement of the village's aging drinking water mains and related infrastructure. In addition, Pulaski will soon begin construction on the Delano Street Sidewalk project. This initiative, funded through a state

consolidated funding application, will connect nine activity centers, two parks, and a pedestrian bridge along its route. Another critical project is the gradual removal of the Pulaski Dam, which will restore Spring Brook and mitigate flood risks for the village.

Albion has re-established its planning board and is working with the commission to develop a comprehensive plan. The town also received a grant from the Dormitory Authority of the State of New York (DASNY) to complete a fire department storage facility with assistance from Tug Hill staff. Orwell has also reinstated its planning board with the appointment of new members. Efforts are underway to secure funding for an updated comprehensive plan, while the town finalizes an alternative water supply project in partnership with Richland. In 2024, both Albion and Orwell implemented electronic signboards to better disseminate public information and enhance communication with residents. The town and village of Parish, along with their joint planning board, completed and adopted an up-

dated comprehensive plan. The village continues to pursue the development of a public water system and was successful in securing additional grant funds in 2024. Amboy received support from the Tug Hill Commission for local laws and land use planning. The town's fire department also secured a DEC grant and is actively working on improvements to its facilities. ■



Salmon Rivers meeting in Albion.

NORTH SHORE COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

In 2024, the MRB Group, a local consulting firm, completed the Economic Resiliency and Recovery Plan for the North Shore Council of Governments (NorCOG), which aims to foster growth and revitalization across the North Shore. NorCOG is working to use the plan to enhance economic development, including potential improvements to the Oswego County Rail Trail. The full report is available at www.norcog.org.

The Route 49 Corridor Study proposal was approved by the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC) and has been underway since summer 2024, with a completion date of summer 2025. This comprehensive study addresses more than just traffic data, incorporating accident analysis, design features, and growth projections. These projections consider the significant economic impact of the Micron semiconductor manufacturing plant, expected to drive

growth in related industries, as well as residential and commercial development.

The intermunicipal agreement between Constantia and Cleveland regarding sewer services concluded in 2024. Moving forward, Constantia is independently pursuing efforts to complete the town sewer project. West Monroe saw significant expansion at the Heidelberg plant, a supplier of cement, aggregates, ready mixed concrete, and asphalt, preparing for the anticipated growth tied to Micron's construction. Central Square completed a new playground project at Goettel Park and implemented several stormwater runoff improvements to enhance local infrastructure.

West Monroe and Constantia are both working on land use planning projects. Many NorCOG members are also using the MetroCount services offered by the commission, which provide valuable traffic data to inform local planning

decisions. NorCOG hosted a NYSDEC wetland presentation to help members better understand new wetland regulations and their implications for the region. ■



NorCOG meeting in West Monroe.

NORTHERN ONEIDA COUNTY COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

The Northern Oneida County Council of Governments (NOCCOG) helped to bring several informational and training work sessions to its membership in 2024, on topics including municipal oversight, lead service lines, town budgets, the fiscal responsibilities of town clerks, and the benefits of municipal mapping. The NOCCOG scholarship program continued, and NOCCOG partnered with the Camden Central School District to send students to the annual Tug Hill Local Government Conference. This past spring, NOCCOG municipal projects coordinator, John Healt, addressed the Oneida County Board of Legislators regarding NOCCOG and its role as a trusted resource for its communities. John also did a presentation on the Tug Hill Commission and NOCCOG for the Mohawk Valley Living in Retirement group.

The GPS mapping program worked in Lee, Trenton, Annsville and Remsen, mapping vital infrastructure locations and trail locations, which will help with budgeting, knowledge transfer,

emergency situations, and grant funding opportunities. Comprehensive plans have been at the forefront, with an updated plan almost complete in the town of Camden, in-progress plans in Boonville (both village and town) and Forestport, and just beginning in the towns of Ava and Remsen. Official highway maps were updated in Annsville and Forestport. Sylvan Beach is amid a large, multi-million-dollar wastewater upgrade and recently completed work on its new welcome center and DPW garage. The town of Remsen finalized a building purchase and has started renovations for a new town hall. The village of Camden completed the rebuilding of their DPW garage. Trenton is expanding water and sewer districts and Floyd replaced the town's water meters. Broadband expansion continued in Ava, Boonville, and Forestport. The village of Boonville received \$4.5 million in NY Forward funding and Holland Patent received grant money for a heat pump for the village office. The towns of Remsen and Vienna launched new municipal



Mark Clark and Bob Sauer.

websites, and Lee purchased property to expand their town park.

Associate Advisors Lisa Bellinger and Joe Rowlands continue to be invaluable members of the NOCCOG team. ■

Paul Baxter Retires After 45 Years of Service

Paul Baxter, the long-time circuit rider for the Salmon Rivers and North Shore Councils of Governments, retired at the end of March. He graduated from the University of Rochester in 1979 with a degree in Political Science and was not quite sure what he was going to do with it. A month later, he was working for the Temporary State Commission on Tug Hill and the North Shore Cooperative Planning Board. At that time, the Salmon Rivers Cooperative Planning Board had a separate circuit rider, but that organization was added to Paul's responsibilities a few years later when that circuit rider moved on from Tug Hill. Years later, both North Shore and Salmon Rivers transitioned to becoming Councils of Governments as Tug Hill's work with town boards and village boards increased.

Paul and commission staff Tom Bodden spearheaded a project in the early days of microcomputers in a cooperative group to use a computer and dedicated software for municipal accounting, in a time when this was an unproven concept in rural municipalities. With the success of that project and increasing affordability, Paul assisted North Shore and Salmon Rivers communities with computerized municipal accounting and budget development.

Paul was also chair of the multimunicipal group that brought cable television to the North Shore communities, and assisted the Salmon Rivers communities in their cable TV franchise processes as well. ■



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Addressing Community Needs Through Training

Commission staff facilitated 19 workshops and presentations reaching over 1,300 attendees in 2024. The largest was the two-day Tug Hill Local Government Conference in May with seven tracks and over 600 attendees. The winter wildlife webinar series debuted with four individual Zoom webinars on fisher, marten, birds, and trout. Additional workshops focused on financial topics with Laird Petrie and the Office of the State Comptroller, as well as Tug Hill history with more information on the Castorland Journal

and the Little Voices about life in the early twentieth century in Page, Lewis County.

Six technical and issue papers authored by commission staff were updated in 2024: Ambulance Service on Rural NYS, The Forest Tax Exemption and Impacts in Municipal Budgets, Making a Successful Grant Application Checklist, Prior Written Notice, and Why Prepare a Comprehensive Plan. One new issue paper was written, NYS Climate Policy Implications: A Tug Hill Housing Analysis. The paper outlines the scope of

climate policy in New York and its impact on Tug Hill residents, capturing the current conditions of housing in the region, including age of housing stock and primary heating method, and then describes the climate policies expectations for homes to compare the gap between the two. It also discusses challenges for Tug Hill, such as its rural nature, cost of energy saving renovations to homes, and the electrification of appliances as well as increased cost of electricity. ■