

HEADWATERS

2025 NEWSLETTER & 2025-2026 ANNUAL REPORT, ISSUE 62



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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: Maria Covey, Totman Gulf, Lorraine.

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

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Working Together to Benefit Tug Hill Communities

The Tug Hill Commission is a unique state entity. What began as a temporary legislative commission has evolved into a “permanent” executive agency focused on providing local, grassroots assistance in the third largest forested area in New York State. The commission has no regulatory authority or grant funds to distribute. What the commission does have is a dedicated staff and board with a wide variety of expertise, and a commitment to working cooperatively with people inside and outside Tug Hill.

This dedication and commitment was on full display in 2025, with the retirement of the longest sitting commissioner ever, Leona Cheresnoski. Leona became a Tug Hill Commissioner in November 1983 and retired in December 2025 after serving on the board for 42 years, or more than 80% of the time the commission has been in existence. She helped oversee the hiring of three of the

four commission executive directors, made countless trips to Albany, was recognized as a Venerable Folk of Tug Hill in 2017, and produced the three-part series “Letters from a Tug Hill Logger” with her son Pete, all while working full-time, raising a family, and contributing to her community in countless other ways. Leona, Tug Hill thanks you.

The commission also had a change of board leadership in 2025, with Gerry Ritter from Forestport elected chair and Bill Scriber from Parish elected vice chair, after many years of service in those positions by Jan Bogdanowicz and Mike Yerdon, respectively. Tom Boxberger continued in his role as secretary and Bob Keller as a member, with new member Fred Munk rounding out the board. A well-attended annual dinner was held in Oneida County, with the focus of the evening’s program on the growing dairy economy with Chobani’s new Rome yogurt

plant announcement.

Year one of the commission’s 2025-29 strategic plan was completed and much positive progress was made, which will be on display soon with a new website dashboard. The commission’s vision continues to be “working toward a region where communities work together effectively and with a shared clear idea of the kind of natural environment and economy they want into the future. This joint local action is 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.” ■



Conference attendees celebrated 15 years of work in the Black River Watershed.

Community and Regional Efforts

Natural Resources Projects Progress

Staff remained actively engaged in two watershed planning initiatives: development of the Sandy Creeks 9 Element Plan and the Oneida Lake 9 Element Plan. In June, the 15th Annual Black River Watershed Conference was successfully held at the Hilton Garden Inn Watertown, bringing together partners and stakeholders from across the region.

The commission also facilitated the Little Salmon River dams annual informational meeting, providing the public with updates on dam removal, safety, research and monitoring, funding opportunities, and the potential effects of removal on aquatic invasive species. Staff continued to participate in three water quality coordinating committees, helping to strengthen connections between natural resource projects and local municipalities. Conversations were renewed with local and state agencies and non-profits regarding the Tug Hill to Adirondack wildlife connectivity linkage initiative. The annual East Branch of Fish Creek Working Group meeting was hosted by the commission in West Leyden, creating opportunities to share information and bring up questions on a large part of the eastern core forest.

Additionally, the commission assisted with the submission of eight grant applications, including three salt storage structures, two groomer grants, three park grants, and two community grants on behalf of municipalities and non-profits. Four grants were awarded:

all three salt storage facilities in the towns of Turin, Western, and Leyden, and one park grant for playground equipment in Port Leyden.

Community Development

Project staff were busy sharing information and resources throughout 2025. Five issue papers and two technical papers were developed on topics ranging from requests for proposals and website creation to winter weather and climate, ATV recreation, short-term rentals, cybersecurity, and dog control. The commission hosted and supported 20 workshops and webinars during the year, providing communities with guidance on subjects such as forming a non-profit, winter weather preparedness, and working with the Amish community. Project staff continued road mapping efforts on behalf of municipalities to accurately reflect jurisdictional highways road

classifications pursuant to local law, highlighting record-keeping and helping towns assess obligations and potential liabilities. Fieldwork efforts extended to coordinating GPS needs for municipal asset mapping, collecting asset data, and providing training to local departments to help increase capacity.

Traffic count data collected using the commission's MetroCount equipment, along with crash data available through the partnership with the Governor's Traffic Safety Committee, proved valuable for community planning, project development, and efforts to improve traffic safety.

Staff were busy presenting at various conferences and events throughout the year. Commission executive director Katie Malinowski and Cooperative Tug Hill Council (CTHC) circuit rider Angie Kimball traveled to New York City in February to present at and attend the Association of Towns' annual conference. Katie and Angie presented three sessions: Councils of Governments Model: A Unique Way to Share Services; Ambulance Service in Rural NYS; and Agrivoltaics: Co-Locating Solar and Agriculture.

Project specialist Jillian Lee presented about how winter is changing in the Tug Hill region at the Black River Watershed Conference and Woodsmen's Field Days. She also spoke about the commission, the importance of local government, and collaboration at the Adirondack Climate Outreach and Resilience Network North Country Climate-Ready Workforce Roundtable. Project specialist Taylor McKinney presented on the new issue paper, ATV Recreation: Considerations for Municipalities, at the CTHC Fall Dinner in September. Katie and planning director Matt Johnson spoke with the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Lewis County about New York's changing energy landscape and local considerations. ■



Community demand for traffic data using the commission's MetroCount was high in 2025.

2025-26 Commission Funding

In fiscal year 2025–26, the Tug Hill Commission received a \$110,000 increase in its state general fund appropriation, representing the third increase in seven years. The commission's primary funding source is its annual state appropriation, supplemented by a \$150,000 special revenue appropriation. Approximately 90 percent of total funding was allocated to personnel costs, with the remaining funds supporting operating expenses.

During the fiscal year, commission staff provided training to more than 1,400 local officials and other participants through virtual webinars and in-person sessions. The Local Government Conference, held in April at the Turning Stone Conference Center, was well attended.

Staff initiated 39 new projects across the region and made progress on an additional 35 ongoing projects. Staff also responded to numerous requests for technical assistance. In addition, the commission continued to work with state agency partners on statewide priorities and initiatives, including renewable energy, open space planning, and transportation.

The commission employed 15 staff members over the course of the year, including five circuit riders serving the region's five councils of government. The remaining ten staff members provided programmatic and administrative support from the commission's Watertown office. ■



Economic development related to dairy was the topic at the commission's annual dinner at the Delta Lake Inn in October. Left to right: Gerry Ritter, Allyson Jones-Brimmer, Max Finbert, Katie Howard, Tom Overton, Katie Malinowski.

- 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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UNAFFILIATED



COOPERATIVE TUG HILL COUNCIL

The Cooperative Tug Hill Council (CTHC) had a successful year with excellent attendance at both full CTHC meetings. The spring meeting featured an introduction to new associate circuit rider, Denali Dietrich, and the fall meeting featured the presentation of a “retirement” gift to associate circuit rider Beth Steria-Rush, who did not renew her contract in 2025. Rod Campbell also joined the CTHC circuit rider ranks, shared for meeting coverage with the North Shore and Salmon Rivers COGs.

Constableville adopted their land use document and first zoning law this year. Rodman continued work with the Tug Hill planning staff on their comprehensive plan. Martinsburg and Port Leyden are also working on comprehensive plans; Port Leyden in conjunction with their first zoning law. Many CTHC municipalities worked on

amending zoning laws, mainly to clearly outline their desires regarding various renewable energy uses.

The two Cooperative Tug Hill Zoning Boards of Appeal adopted their inter-municipal agreements (IMAs) and bylaws and began hearing cases this year. The eastern board (Pinckney, Montague, Harrisburg, Turin and Constableville) heard several cases, while the western board (Boylston, Florence, Osceola and Redfield) did not receive an application this year.

Lorraine, with help from the commission, continues through the process of re-implementing minimum maintenance roads designations following the state legislation allowing this in their town. Turin has begun the process of implementing minimum maintenance roads for the first time as well.

The 2025 election brought significant turn-over of local officials with nine new chief elected officials and many other changes to board members and other positions. Helping these officials prepare for their new positions will be a priority for 2026. ■



Angie Kimball, Roger Tibbetts, Beth Steria-Rush.

NORTH SHORE COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

The North Shore Council of Governments (NorCOG) began 2025 by updating its inter-municipal agreement and bylaws, reinforcing its commitment to regional collaboration. Building on its 2024 Economic Resiliency and Recovery Plan, NorCOG focused this year on economic vitality, outreach, and long-term sustainability across the north shore.

Youth engagement became a new priority through the Civic Service Student Activity Program (CSS-AP), designed to introduce students to local government and inspire future civic leaders. NorCOG also strengthened community promotion efforts. In partnership with the Oswego County Tourism Advisory Council, a 16-page community guide is under development, highlighting local businesses, recreation, and tourism assets. A new website and social media presence were launched to improve

communication and accessibility.

Infrastructure planning remained central. The towns of West Monroe and Constantia signed a memorandum of understanding supporting the Southern Oswego County Regional Interceptor Sewer (SOCRIS) engineering study. By year's end, Oswego County issued a request for qualifications for engineering services. Additionally, NorCOG was represented through staff on the Micron Strategy Economic Development Work Group and the Oneida 9E Watershed Advisory Committee.

NorCOG and the Salmon Rivers Council of Governments hosted a joint annual dinner in Cleveland, featuring updates from Tug Hill Commission staff and presentations on the Tug Hill Reserve Act, regional economic development, and the Oswego County Comprehensive Plan.

At the municipal level, Constantia and West Mon-

roe remained active in regional infrastructure and traffic discussions, Cleveland continued strengthening intermunicipal coordination, and Central Square advanced work on its comprehensive plan to guide future growth and development. ■



NorCOG and SRCG annual dinner.

SALMON RIVERS COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

The Salmon Rivers Council of Governments (SRCG) began 2025 by updating its inter-municipal agreement, bylaws, and annual budget, reaffirming its commitment to strong regional collaboration and effective governance. Throughout the year, SRCG focused on coordinated planning, infrastructure initiatives, and advancing shared priorities among its member municipalities. New leadership was elected toward the end of the year, with updated chair and vice chair roles.

Comprehensive planning remained a central focus. Richland and Pulaski continued progress on their joint comprehensive plan update, strengthening alignment on land use, economic development, and preservation of community character. Albion advanced its comprehensive plan update to approximately 80 percent completion, creating a modern framework to guide responsible growth and evaluate long-term infrastructure needs, including potential water system improvements. SRCG also maintained representation on the Pulaski Downtown Revi-

talization Initiative committee, supporting strategic investment in the village's downtown. In addition, Pulaski submitted a NY BRICKS grant to enhance streetscape improvements and promote continued revitalization efforts.

Support for emergency services was another important initiative. A grant application was prepared for submission in early 2026 to the Firehouse Subs Public Safety Foundation on behalf of the Ringgold Fire District. If awarded, the funding would assist in purchasing updated, compliant turnout gear to ensure firefighter safety and operational readiness.

Infrastructure and community investment efforts continued across the region. The village of Parish advanced discussions related to water and wastewater system improvements, while the town of Parish entered into a purchase agreement for a new town hall. MetroCount traffic counters were deployed in Pulaski, Amboy, and Albion to collect data that will inform future transportation planning decisions. SRCG leaders also remained engaged in broader county

wide initiatives, including the Oswego County Comprehensive Plan.

Looking ahead, SRCG will continue exploring shared services opportunities, including potential coordination of zoning board of appeals functions and dog control services. Discussions have also begun around expanding trail systems along the Salmon River to enhance public access and regional connectivity. Through collaboration and forward-thinking planning, SRCG remains committed to supporting vibrant communities while preserving the region's natural character. ■

RIVER AREA COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

The River Area Council of Governments (RACOG) continued its growth in 2025 with the addition of the town of Grieg and the village of Croghan, for a total of 14 member communities. To support this expansion, RACOG contracted with three associate circuit riders at various times. Paul Shepard and Sayer Colwell were the two main associate circuit riders to attend meetings on evenings with multiple board meetings. RACOG hosted its fourth annual Economic Visioning Summit at the Jefferson-Lewis BOCES Howard G. Sackett Technical Center, featuring presentations from various stakeholders.

RACOG continued its youth engagement initiatives through the Civic Service Student Activity Program. The program includes 11 students from three school districts, designed to foster civic awareness and encourage active involvement in local government and community issues. There

are two full days with students, in the fall in the classroom, and in the spring where students get to tour a town board meeting, local fire department, and a wastewater treatment plant, to gain firsthand insight into municipal operations.

RACOG also has a youth committee as a think tank for local governments, helping to identify and address regional needs from a youth perspective. In 2025, the committee conducted a peer survey to gather input on what young people would like to see. A total of 114 surveys were completed, with key themes including a desire for more year-round and recreational activities (such as roller skating and a splash pad), more opportunities and events for all ages, a safe community environment, and dedicated spaces where youth can gather and spend time with friends.

The commission assisted in finalizing comprehensive plans for Wilna, Carthage, Deferiet,

Denmark, Castorland, and Copenhagen. Commission planners have also been actively supporting Deferiet and Champion with zoning updates. Additionally, the commission worked with Carthage on recreational park grant applications and infrastructure mapping initiatives for Wilna and Deferiet. ■



Civic Service Student Activity Program at town of Lowville board meeting.

NORTHERN ONEIDA COUNTY COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

2025 brought change to the Northern Oneida County Council of Governments (NOCCOG) executive committee with the appointment of Pam Dibble, from Annsville, to replace longtime board member and former chair, John Dorion. Once again, NOCCOG helped bring several informational and training sessions to its membership on various topics including Best Practices for Land Use, Code Enforcement, and Property Tax Assessment in Amish Communities. The NOCCOG scholarship program continued. NOCCOG produced and distributed a well-received municipal reference guide to all local officials. The first ever NOCCOG service survey was also released to member communities, showing NOCCOG as a valuable resource. The GPS mapping program continued with work in Annsville, Forestport, Boonville, and the village of Remsen. The annual meeting, held at Woods Valley in Western, had more than 60 attendees, including many local and state dignitaries.

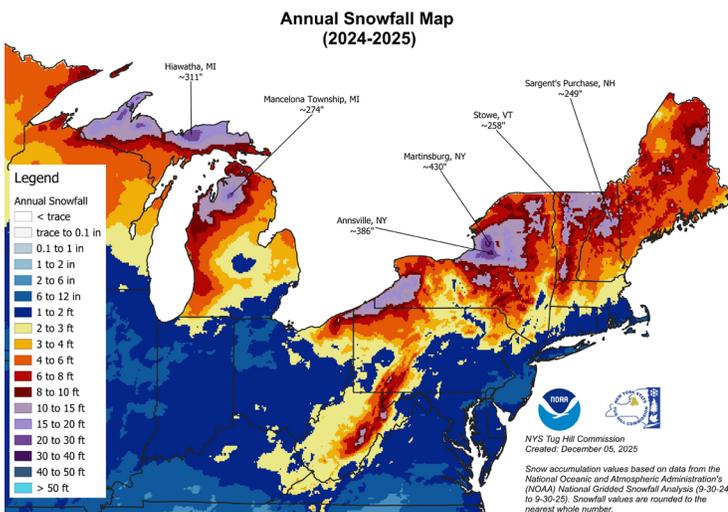
Opening roads to ATV traffic continues to be debated in many NOCCOG municipalities. Com-

prehensive plans have been completed in the towns of Camden, Forestport and jointly in the town and village of Boonville, with work underway in the towns of Ava and Remsen. The town of Remsen also finished renovations of their new town hall and have transitioned into their new space. Trenton continues with the expansion of their water and sewer districts, while the village of Camden is still obtaining funding for their needed water and sewer upgrades. Annsville created a new fire district, and the rural ambulance service that covered Steuben, Trenton, Remsen and Forestport merged with Marcellus Ambulance, allowing for expanded coverage. Most municipalities have updated and switched to .gov websites. Floyd and Sylvan Beach have adopted short-term rental laws. Steuben lead the county in a petition against National Grid's proposed power line upgrades and re-route. Holland Patent is looking to upgrade their village park, Lee continues to improve their town park, and the village of Boonville completed their park improvements.



Sarah Foster Calero, Oneida County Tourism, addressed attendees at the NOCCOG annual dinner in Western.

In addition to his GPS mapping responsibilities, Mike Thompson took on the additional role of associate advisor, joining contractors Lisa Bellinger and Joe Rowlands. ■



Tug Hill Snowfall

Tug Hill's bragging rights for most snow east of the Rocky Mountains continues. This map shows annual snowfall in the northeast US during the 2024-2025 winter season, based on data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) National Gridded Snowfall Analysis. Martinsburg had the most with ~430 inches, followed by Annsville with ~386 inches. Interestingly, the dark purple shading on the map is very close to the shape of the region. To see a bigger version of the map scan the QR code. ■



tinyurl.com/THCsnowfall

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Planning Tools for Local Governance



The planning staff remained very busy this year with the usual requests for comprehensive plan updates and zoning/land use law work. Municipalities in the southwest portion of the region have been ramping up work in planning due to the anticipated growth related to the Micron chip fabrication plant in the town of Clay, Onondaga County. This facility is projected by some to increase the population of central New York by over 50,000. The commission's increase in planning staff members has helped manage the increasing number of requests more quickly than in years past.

Comprehensive planning efforts have been enhanced by the use of online community

surveys. The commission began using this approach in the last several years and survey response rates have been improving as the public becomes more familiar with this technology. The online survey software allows results to be easily compiled and analyzed. Staff also continue to utilize geographic information system (GIS) software to create state-of-the-art maps and perform spatial analysis.

Hot button issues in planning continue to include renewable energy developments such as large-scale solar facilities and battery energy storage systems. Most Tug Hill municipalities have some level of review capability now regarding these. Staff are also receiving requests

for help in regulating short-term rental properties across the region. The commission has developed and updated issue papers on these topics. Another issue that has emerged is planning for housing, in particular multi-family units, accessory dwellings, and tiny houses.

Staff continue to offer training for municipal planning boards and zoning boards of appeals. Training is offered to individual boards or groups of boards from neighboring towns and villages. These sessions can be approved by municipalities to count towards the four hours of training that board members are required to receive annually by New York State. ■