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SMART LAND USE IN SARATOGA SPRINGS

Sustainable Saratoga is a not-for-profit organization that promotes sustainable practices and the protection of natural resources, through education, advocacy and action, for the benefit of current and future generations in the Saratoga Springs area.

Across the nation in the last two decades there have been increasing community concerns about the need for new ways to grow that boost the economy, protect the environment, and enhance community vitality. These new concerns center around the ability to create a more sustainable future that will meet both our current and future needs. The most significant effort came from the Smart Growth Network, which in 1996 created some smart growth principles to guide land use decisions. The Network's partners included environmental groups, historic preservation organizations, professional organizations, developers, real estate interests, and local and state government entities. Sustainable Saratoga has adopted these principles to provide a policy guide for smart land use decisions in the City of Saratoga Springs.

Saratoga Springs is our “City in the Country.” It is a community with many facets. It is a world-class tourist destination with a highly regarded educational and arts presence. It has a significant historic character and a continuing commitment to preserve that identity. It has a vibrant downtown core with a surrounding area of suburban and rural character. As a uniquely successful upstate New York community, it is subject to various growth pressures and the provision of amenities and services for its residents and visitors. Our city is also facing impacts from global climate change, which will require new changes and challenges for our land use policies. In this document, Sustainable Saratoga sets forth general principles for effective and prudent land use in Saratoga Springs.

The “City in the Country” theme for Saratoga Springs has come to mean a city with an intensively-developed urban core and an economically vibrant central business district, with well-defined urban edges, and an outlying area comprised of open lands, natural areas and low-density rural development. This policy guide document sets forth some key land use principles intended to help maintain and preserve Saratoga Springs as “the City in the Country.”

Principle #1:

COMMIT TO THE RETENTION AND MAINTENANCE OF THE CITY'S "GREENBELT" TO PROTECT NATURAL RESOURCES AND NATURAL SYSTEMS, AND TO PRESERVE OPEN SPACE, FARMLAND, AND NATURAL BEAUTY.

Natural areas provide valuable ecosystem services, habitat for plants and animals, and recreational opportunities. The commitment to preserve natural areas results in protected farmland and pasture land, places of natural beauty, and important natural resources and environmental areas, such as wetlands and woodlands. Open space preservation bolsters local economies by providing a rural context for the community that is attractive to residents and visitors alike. When natural areas are preserved and new growth is guided into already-developed community centers, the community's overall quality of life is enhanced.

Areas of unfragmented open space foster healthy ecosystems which support our economy, health and well-being. Some of the important functions that healthy ecosystems provide are:

- Maintaining hydrologic cycles
- Cleaning the air
- Purifying water
- Crop pollination
- Carbon sequestration
- Climate regulation
- Nutrient dispersal
- Nutrient recycling
- Waste processing
- Flood control
- Pest control

In addition, preserving open space provides fiscal benefits by increasing local property values, generating additional tourism dollars, and requiring less public investment in infrastructure than land-intensive development.

Sustainable Saratoga is committed to retaining and defending the City's greenbelt. We promote protection of sensitive environmental areas, stream corridors, flood-prone areas, wildlife habitats and migration corridors, farmland, scenic areas, recreation areas, gateways to the community, and other important aspects of the greenbelt. In these areas, land use regulations should restrict incompatible uses and the intensity of development in order to minimize environmental impacts. Where development occurs in the greenbelt, it should be guided by conservation design and environmental best practices. In addition, design guidelines should serve to clearly distinguish the rural character of the greenbelt from that of the more urbanized areas of the City.

Principle #2:

PREVENT “SPRAWL” BY DIRECTING DEVELOPMENT DOWNTOWN AND IN OTHER INFILL AREAS.

New growth within the community should largely take place in existing core areas. Those areas have the most developed infrastructure that can best accommodate such development. With proper urban design standards, the downtown area, designated infill transect zone areas and even existing neighborhoods should be able to provide for redevelopment that contributes to a vibrant and sustainable city.

The extension of roads, waterlines, and sewer lines beyond the urban core should be largely restricted. The construction of city infrastructure into the City’s more rural areas typically results in increased development within those areas, regardless of the merits of the development, resulting in an “if you build it, they will come” phenomenon. Sustainable Saratoga advocates development that is significantly clustered in the downtown area and other areas designated for infill within the urban core. Establishing a limit to infrastructure extension would limit sprawl, protect rural land, and solidify desirable development patterns.

Development that is permitted in the outer areas of the community needs to be carefully designed and sited to preserve rural character, and to avoid any further infrastructure investment.

There also needs to be a well-defined edge to the urban and rural portions of the community. That edge and the attractiveness of the transportation entranceways to the community help distinguish our City from most others where the same character of development goes on for miles. This distinction is a key factor in attracting tourists.

Principle #3:

MAKE LAND USE DECISIONS THAT PROTECT THE ENVIRONMENT AND LEAD TO A CLIMATE-FRIENDLY, ENERGY-EFFICIENT COMMUNITY.

The prospect of rising energy costs and climate warming presents new challenges that need to be addressed in land use decisions.

The 2011 Report: “Responding to Climate Change in NYS” by the New York State Energy Research & Development Authority is a good core study of how climate change is likely to affect New York State. The potential impacts of climate change on Saratoga Springs are:

- More storms of greater intensity (heavy downpours)
- Higher average temperatures (up 3 to 5.5 degrees by 2050)
- Higher average precipitation (up to 5% increase by 2050)
- More extremes in temperatures
- More droughts
- More flooding
- Higher levels of lakes and rivers
- Increased chances of water supply sources being polluted
- Flooding of key transportation infrastructure

- Increased air pollution
- More power outages
- More economic and social disruption
- Changes ecosystem (shift in species ranges, population crashes, loss of biodiversity)
- Changes in agriculture
- Etc.

Similarly, the National Climate Assessment Report released in May 2014, extensively reviewed the impacts of climate change, and concluded that severe rainfall, increased flooding, and extreme weather events are projected to have a significant impact on areas in the Northeastern U.S.

Actions that can be taken to reduce impacts:

- Build capital projects with more flexibility for future conditions
- Improve data collection and monitoring
- Revise floodplain definitions
- Increase protections to wetlands, floodplains, streams, lakes, and land features that help control flooding
- Improve building codes for efficiency and strength
- Expand disaster preparedness planning (first responders, priority service, shelters, food supplies, etc.)
- Install more alternative local energy sources
- Equip public transportation and emergency vehicle fleets with alternative fuels

Both the public and private sectors should undertake activities that address the impacts of climate change, increase energy efficiencies, promote green infrastructure, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Compact land use patterns save on transportation energy and heating/cooling expenditures. Urban forestry activities of planting street trees result in numerous energy savings. Innovative rooftop gardens, stormwater recapturing, water conservation and urban greenhouses provide environmental benefits. Urban agriculture and composting can significantly reduce the energy needed to grow food, the amount of food waste that ends up in landfills, and the harmful methane resulting from food decomposition. Land use development should stay clear of flood-prone and other sensitive environmental areas to avoid loss of resources.

These types of activities will have many positive benefits, such as:

- Savings on operating costs
- Better local air quality
- Greater energy independence
- Lower mitigation costs of climate change

Principle #4:

SUPPORT LAND USES THAT BUILD A DURABLE LOCAL ECONOMY.

Saratoga Springs needs to continue to encourage and promote land uses that provide a diversified and durable local economy—one that is resilient in the face of changes in state, national or global markets. The City’s economy should be rooted in local economic resources to which it can adapt with agility. The community should strive toward supporting jobs that are close to people’s homes, create economies that stay in the community, and serve the real needs of local residents.

Sustainable Saratoga encourages the establishment of long-term sustainability objectives for Saratoga Springs and Saratoga County, bearing in mind the shifts that are occurring in the economic landscape and potential future threats to the local economy. New and emerging technologies may provide new employment and career opportunities within the City for local residents, but these technologies may also render some traditional jobs obsolete. We support reducing barriers to home-based businesses and services. Consideration should be given to clean manufacturing and value-added industries that are appropriately sited in proximity to existing residential and commercial areas.

Land use activities that support a strong, local, durable economy may have many characteristics including:

- Locally focused businesses that are invested in creating and maintaining a stable but growing community
- A diversity of industries that are mutually supportive
- Recirculation of local capital
- Minimal imports of goods, services, and inputs such as energy
- Effective leveraging of limited public funding
- High environmental standards that preserve and protect natural resources and the natural environment
- Resiliency in the face of large employers that may close or downsize
- Partnerships between public, private and non-profit entities engaged in supporting existing businesses, attracting investment, and developing a first-rate workforce
- Social equity and environmental justice

Principle #5:

IMPLEMENT MIXED LAND USES MORE EFFECTIVELY THROUGHOUT THE COMMUNITY.

Sustainable Saratoga supports land use standards that respect community values. By creating a community that reflects the interests of all residents, there is a greater likelihood that buildings (and therefore entire neighborhoods) will retain their economic vitality and value over time and provide residents with a distinctive and beautiful place that they can call "home" for generations to come.

A commitment to mixed land uses is an essential component for a sustainable Saratoga Springs. Siting small-scale commercial establishments close to or within urban neighborhoods attracts pedestrians and helps revitalize community life by making streets, public spaces, and pedestrian-oriented retail become places where people meet. By putting residential, commercial and recreational uses in close proximity to one another, alternatives to driving, such as walking or biking, become viable. Mixed land uses also provide a more diverse and sizable population and commercial base for supporting viable public transit that is more energy-efficient than single-occupancy vehicles.

Siting compatible commercial areas close to residential areas can raise property values, helping to increase local tax receipts and relieve residential property owners of some tax burden. Businesses also recognize the benefits associated with mixed use neighborhoods that attract more people, increasing economic activity. Employers benefit from being in close proximity to neighborhoods where their workers want to live. It is becoming apparent that the current generation of young people is more likely than previous generations to prefer vibrant and dynamic urban settings over automobile-oriented neighborhoods.

Principal #6:

PROMOTE COMPACT BUILDING DESIGN AT AN APPROPRIATE SCALE.

Compact building design is an alternative to conventional, land-consumptive development. Compact building design allows communities to be laid out in a way that preserves more open space, incorporates more street trees and urban parks, and is more cost effective for developers, occupants, and the public.

Communities that include a variety of house sizes and types command a higher market value on a per-square-foot basis than do those in adjacent conventional suburban developments. Furthermore, on a per-unit basis, it is cheaper to provide and maintain infrastructure services (such as water, sewer, electricity, and telecommunications) in more compact neighborhoods than in dispersed communities. An increasing number of developments nationally are successfully integrating compact design into community building efforts.

In addition, priority should be given to rehabilitating and preserving existing structures through a process that promotes historic preservation and saves resources. Our city has long had a compact core of development that started with a densely populated village. We are fortunate to have preserved and reused many of the structures from our past. These efforts should continue into the future.

Principal #7:

PROVIDE DIVERSE HOUSING STOCK.

Access to quality housing for people of all income levels is an integral component of any sustainable community. Housing availability is also a key factor in determining household access to transportation, services, education, jobs and energy consumption. By applying smart growth approaches to the creation of a wider range of housing choices, Saratoga Springs will ensure a

better jobs-to-housing ratio, and generate a strong foundation of support for neighborhood transit stops and other services. A diverse and ample supply of housing is necessary to accommodate the young workers who are essential to ensuring a sustainable economy in the future. Businesses that depend on a high-quality workforce will be attracted to places where their workers want to live. Creative housing types are also necessary to allow the elderly to “age in place” in the neighborhoods that have significant meaning and history for them.

Efforts to provide a diverse housing stock must be accompanied by strategies that ensure housing affordability for all segments of the population.

Principal #8:

SUPPORT MULTI-MODAL TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS.

Many communities are seeking to reduce the preeminence of the automobile in urban settings in an effort to improve the efficiency of transportation systems and to reduce traffic congestion, air pollution, and energy use. Communities which are structured to support walking and biking are desirable places to live and work. When communities recognize that public streets should accommodate a range of users, the streetscape must be configured to account for the safety of everyone, including pedestrians, bicyclists, transit riders, automobile users, people with disabilities, and others.

Successful approaches to transportation planning have been implemented in many other communities. These approaches recognize the importance of coordinating land use and transportation; increasing the availability of high-quality transit service; creating redundancy, resiliency and connectivity within street networks; and ensuring connectivity between pedestrian, bike, transit, and road facilities.

Sustainable Saratoga supports the implementation of the City’s Complete Streets Policy. We advocate increased opportunities for bicycle and vehicle sharing, and the development of a parking management plan for downtown Saratoga Springs and its core neighborhoods. The parking plan must address the high costs of free parking, required off-street parking, and other ways in which the automobile is prioritized in the urban landscape, and provide for sustainable transportation alternatives.

Principle #9:

MAKE LAND USE DECISIONS THAT ENGAGE THE PUBLIC WITH TRANSPARENCY AND INCLUSIVENESS.

The City should embrace opportunities for greater participation in land use matters by all sectors of the community. Informed citizens will, in the long run, make smart land use decision that will meet the needs of current and future generations. In addition, new realities require innovative partnership of public and private human and financial resources.

Smart land use decision-making normally includes the following:

- Encourages participation and active involvement of all sectors of the community

- Respects and protects the rights of minority populations and promotes environmental justice
- Provides development rules that express with clarity the intended end result or product
- Establishes criteria that will guide future land use decisions (neighborhood services, diverse transportation options, impacts on the tax base, etc.)
- Establishes clear guidelines for transparency in government operations and decisions
- Promotes the development and continued operations of neighborhood community groups
- Encourages the participation and involvement of non-profit organizations

This document was developed and endorsed by the Housing and Urban Planning Committee on May 9, 2014. The Board of Sustainable Saratoga endorsed this document on June 10, 2014.