

# Capital District Regional Planning Commission: Spring 2021 Webinar Series



## Comprehensive Plans: Gaining a Competitive Advantage for Your Community

Presented by:

Jane Nicholson, AICP, CFM  
Diana Smith, Senior Municipal Advisor

**SmarterLocalGov** Team  
MRB Group

# Why a Comprehensive Plan?



*“If you fail to plan,  
you are planning to fail.”*

-Benjamin Franklin



# Why a Comprehensive Plan?



**MRB** | group

*“As for the future, your task is not to foresee it, but to enable it.”*



- Antoine de Saint Exupery

# Why a Comprehensive Plan?



Comprehensive plans:

Just a lot of talk?

Many benefits -

- To planners
- To governing boards
- To community members
- To businesses
- To State

# Comprehensive Plan



Defined by NYS statute:

**“An expression of a municipality’s goals and recommended actions to achieve those goals; a document which focuses on intermediate and long-term protection, enhancement, growth and development of a municipality; an outline for orderly growth, providing continued guidance for decision making...”**

# Local Planners / Boards



The role of local planning / Planning Board is generally focused on land use

Day to day considerations:

1. Site Plan reviews – keeping local government on track
  - ✓ Is it ready for review?
  - ✓ Fees submitted
  - ✓ Elements in local code met
  - ✓ If a hearing is required when does it need to be held?
  - ✓ Action needs to be taken 62 days after submission if no hearing held
  - ✓ Is County Referral required? (County has 30 days to respond)

# Local Planners / Boards



## Typical considerations:

- ✓ Legal data (tax map #, owner name, date, north arrow, scale)
- ✓ Environmental impact: drainage, soil, archaeological, natural features
- ✓ Parking configuration
- ✓ Circulation: ingress and egress
- ✓ Screening and landscaping
- ✓ Signs
- ✓ Lighting
- ✓ Snow storage
- ✓ Location/dimension of buildings
- ✓ Adjacent land uses and features

# Local Planners / Boards



Seeing the trees vs. the forest!

Comprehensive Plans force  
consideration of “the bigger  
picture”...

...over time.

Existing Comp Plan makes local  
planning decisions easier!  
(the litmus test)



# Comprehensive Plan



*From a planner's point of view...*

Defined by NYS statute:

“An expression of a municipality’s goals and recommended actions to achieve those goals; a document which focuses on intermediate and long-term protection, enhancement, growth and development of a municipality, an outline for orderly growth, providing continued guidance for decision making...”

Tool containing data that's useful for day-to-day planning recommendations

# Governing Boards



**Special Use Permit: “The authorization of a particular land use that is permitted in a zoning law (is) subject to specific requirements that are imposed to assure that the proposed use is in harmony with the immediate neighborhood and will not adversely affect surrounding properties”**

**Variances: grant relief from strict adherence of local codes (based on hardship, inability to conform...)**

**Requirement -- result will not alter essential character of neighborhood**

# Governing Boards



Codes often provide a laundry list:

- ✓ Minimum lot sizes, lot coverage & setbacks
- ✓ Buffering to address lighting, noise, odor etc.
- ✓ Traffic impacts (parking, access, etc.)

What happens when codes don't adequately address the issues?

...or members argue about “the character of the neighborhood”?

# Decision Making



The goal:

- ✓ Consistency
- ✓ Fairness
- ✓ Ability to withstand challenge

The first two ***weigh heavily*** on the third!

# Decision Making



When there is no precedent...

Land use decisions should ***always*** support the general welfare of the people (the community).

# Comprehensive Plan



A comprehensive plan adds fire-power to a legal defense for decision making.

State law says:  
Zoning and planning must be legislated and enforced "... in accordance with the comprehensive plan."

# Comprehensive Plan

*From a governing board's point of view...*



Defined by NYS statute:

“An expression of a municipality’s goals and recommended actions to achieve those goals; a document which focuses on intermediate and long-term protection, enhancement, growth and development of a municipality; an outline for orderly growth, providing continued guidance for decision making...”

# Community residents



There is no better tool to determine the best interests of a community and its residents than a community-created comprehensive plan.

- Public education
- Public survey
- Workshops
- Public Hearings



# Comprehensive Plan



Planning process is a vehicle for improved communication.

Finished product is the voice of residents in the community, reflecting what they want and need.

Greater chance of seeing goals implemented if the community “owns” them

Community ownership means goals “outlive” tenure of boards / members.

# Comprehensive Plan

*From a resident's point of view...*



Defined by NYS statute:

“An expression of a municipality’s goals and recommended actions to achieve those goals; a document which focuses on intermediate and long-term protection, enhancement, growth and development of a municipality; an outline for orderly growth, providing continued guidance for decision making...”

They're finally listening to me!

# Economic Development



Comp Plan is a vision for the future of the community – can justify substantial investment.

- The Gould Hotel - \$7 Mil infusion



# Economic Development



Comp Plan is a vision for the future of the community – can justify substantial investment.

- The Gould Hotel - \$7 Mil infusion
- Bonadent – quality of life translated into \$\$\$\$
- Restore New York - \$2.5 Mil from the State
- Other project funds - \$3 Mil +
- DRI - \$10 Mil from the State

# Economic Development



Plan goals often result in improved policies:

- ✓ Land use regulations
- ✓ Adoption of new laws guiding development, such as design guidelines, capital improvement budgets, and economic development activities

Developers / investors appreciate a clear path, with less opposition!

# Economic Development



Business owners are often community members, too!

Non-resident business owners become invested “community members.”

The networking forms bonds!

# Comprehensive Plan

*From a business owner's point of view...*



Defined by NYS statute:

“An expression of a municipality’s goals and recommended actions to achieve those goals; a document which focuses on intermediate and long-term protection, enhancement, growth and development of a municipality; an outline for orderly growth, providing continued guidance for decision making...”

# State of New York



**MRB** | *group*

Current “State of the State”:

- Tax Cap / Spending Freeze Era
- Shared Services / Regionalism
- Sustainability



# State of New York



**MRB** | *group*

Current “State of the State”:

- REDCs
- CFA process
- Clamor

# Comprehensive Plan

*From the State's point of view...*



Defined by NYS statute:

**“An expression of a municipality’s goals and recommended actions to achieve those goals; a document which focuses on intermediate and long-term protection, enhancement, growth and development of a municipality; an outline for orderly growth, providing continued guidance for decision making...”**

# Comprehensive Plan

***Context: the State's interest in regionalization***



Conveys to the State that community planning and goals recognize regional plans.

If the Comp Plan is in alignment with the REDC's strategic plan, then a project that supports the Comp Plan supports the regional plan.

Having a Comp Plan can strengthen a funding application.

# Practical Outcomes



***From your community leadership perspective!***

Services: What do residents really value/want?

Land uses: Are there issues? Are there tools to support development? Does zoning support economic sustainability?

Shared Services: Only with an understanding of needs/weaknesses can we have a viable target for shared services.

Direction: What will the community support?

# The End Result



## A Comprehensive Plan can:

- ✓ Strengthen planning boards by providing a vehicle for influence on long-term community plans
- ✓ Serve as a foundation for planning board / governing board decision making
- ✓ Provide legal justification / defense for land use decisions

# The End Result



## A Comprehensive Plan can:

- ✓ Improve communication from and to residents
- ✓ Promote regional approaches to local challenges
- ✓ Improve opportunities for external funding

# The End Result



## A Comprehensive Plan can:

- ✓ Improve local codes / policies to clarify development processes
- ✓ Generate interest in private investment
- ✓ Save taxpayer dollars

### Reduction in:

Staff hours – data gathering, resident education, resident assistance, processing applications, etc

Legal expenses (lawsuits can still come, but defense has some weighty credibility)

### Increase in:

Opportunities for funding

Potential for shared services, identified compatibility

# The End Result



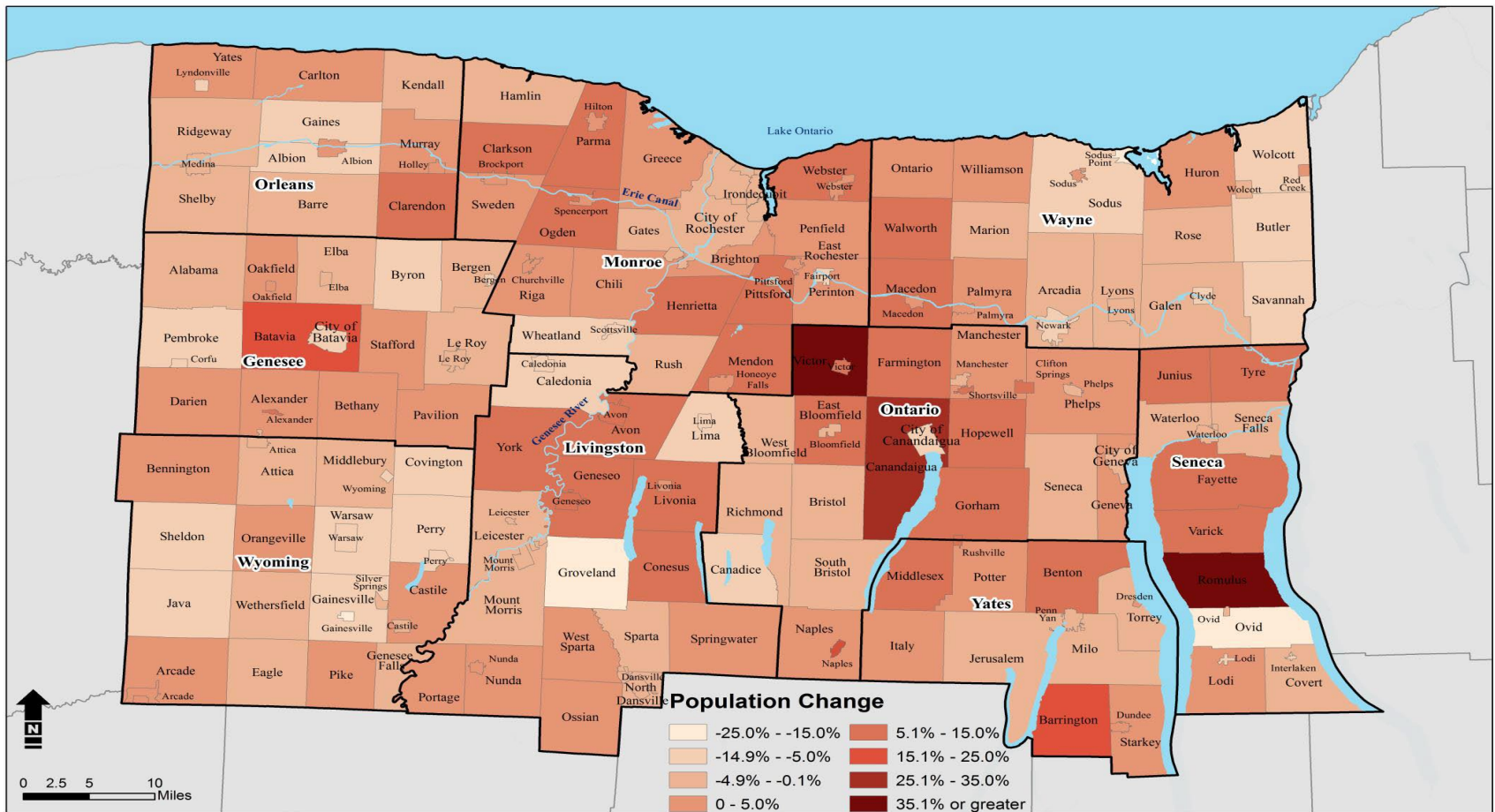
**MRB** | *group*

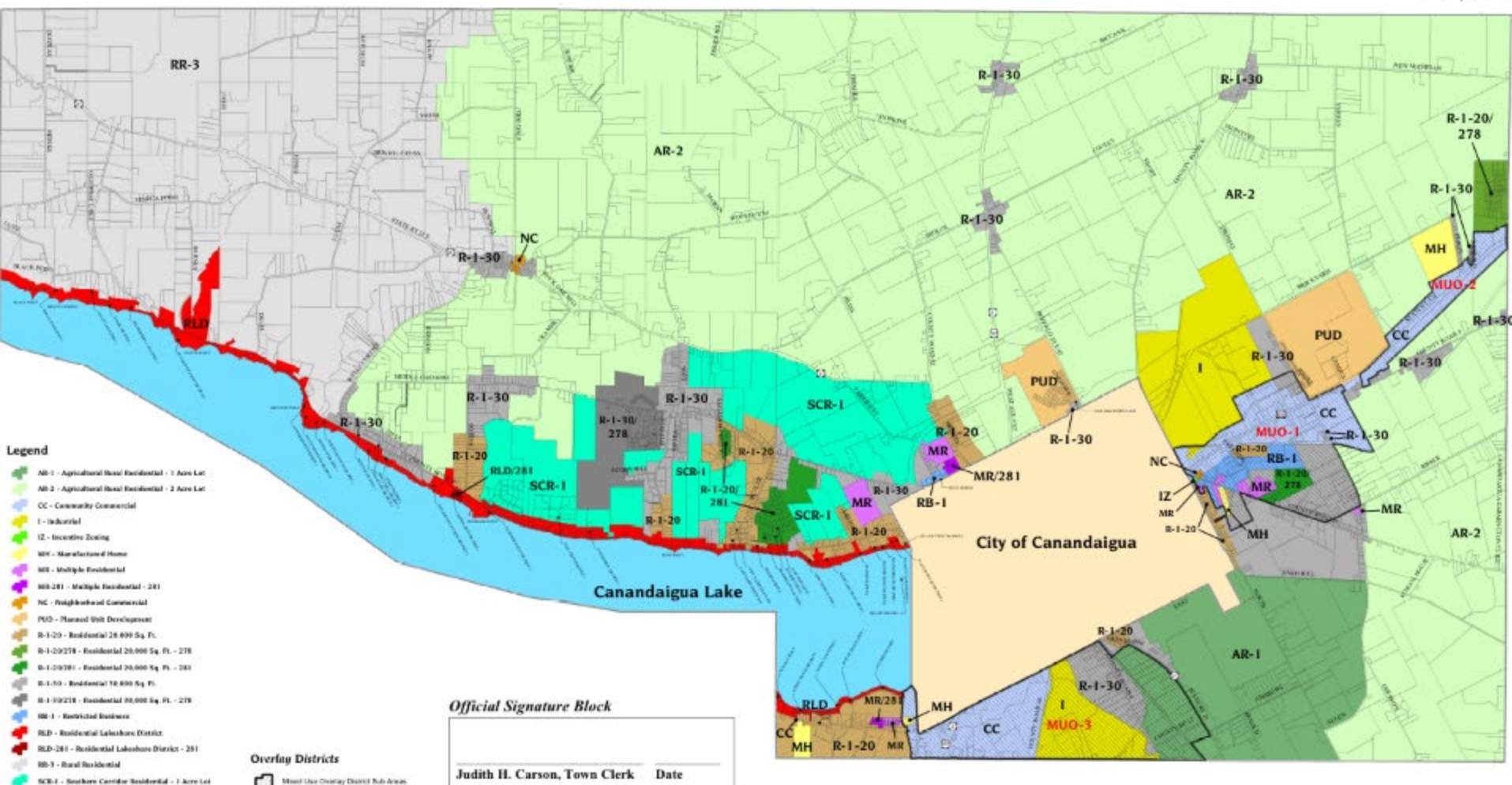
## A Comprehensive Plan can:

- ✓ Improve local codes / policies to clarify development processes
- ✓ Generate interest in private investment
- ✓ Save taxpayer dollars\*\*\*
- ✓ Strengthen the community!



# Population Change: 2000-2010





## MIXED USE OVERLAY (MUO) DISTRICT SUB AREAS

TOWN OF CANANDAIGUA  
ONTARIO COUNTY, NY



MRB Project 06/0000  
Date: 1/10/2007

0 2,500 5,000 7,500 10,000  
1"=200' When Printed at 24" x 36"

Maping Prepared By  
**MRB group**  
 Engineering, Architecture, Surveying, P.C.  
 2400 Broadway Boulevard  
 Buffalo, NY 14221  
 716.441.0000  
 www.mrbgroup.com



# Best Practices



# Comprehensive Planning



**MRB** | *group*

The usual deterrent:  
Affordability.



# An Innovative Approach



*Give a man a fish and you feed him  
for a day; teach a man to fish and  
you feed him for a lifetime.*

- Ancient Proverb

# An Innovative Approach



## Grant request from NYSERDA:

- Four Allegany County communities –
  - Town of Alfred
  - Village of Alfred
  - Town of Wellsville
  - Village of Wellsville

## Outcome:

- Four Planning Processes: Two Joint Comprehensive Plans

# Our Approach



## Project goals:

- Address individual questions / concerns
- Provide admin / process guidance
- Give guidance on content / reg. requirements
- Convey “lessons learned” from experience
- Individualized planning support

# Our Approach



## Project deliverables:

- Project website:  
[www.alleganycompplanschool.com](http://www.alleganycompplanschool.com)



# Our Approach



**Allegany**  
COUNTY

The official project website, provided by MRB Group for Allegany County Planner Kier Dirlam

## Comprehensive Plan School

Home

Participants

Contact

### Welcome to the Official Site of the Allegany County Comprehensive Plan School Project

This website has been provided by MRB Group to serve as an online resource for project participants. For more information about the project, please contact County Planner Kier Dirlam at (585) 268-7472 or [dirlamk@gmail.com](mailto:dirlamk@gmail.com).

### Participant Portal to Class Materials and Resources



### An Innovative Project, Funded by NYSERDA

Often, Comprehensive Plans are lengthy, process-oriented projects. The time commitment alone can be daunting to community leaders who see its value, but aren't sure how to proceed.

To address the need for affordable planning and to promote best-practices in the process, Allegany County Planner Kier Dirlam proposed a unique approach to providing planning and development services to local municipal governments by launching a "Comprehensive Planning School."

This project will provide participating municipalities an opportunity to engage in this critical planning process by attending classes and utilizing resources provided by the County Planner and MRB Group, consultants selected to assist with the training.

The program began in March, 2015, with four local communities committed to a series of classroom activities and meetings. Each is designed to provide them the knowledge and tools needed to direct their own comprehensive planning process. The objective is to encourage community planning, give focus to Smart Growth principles and sustainability, and allow four Allegany County communities an opportunity they might not have been able to afford on their own.

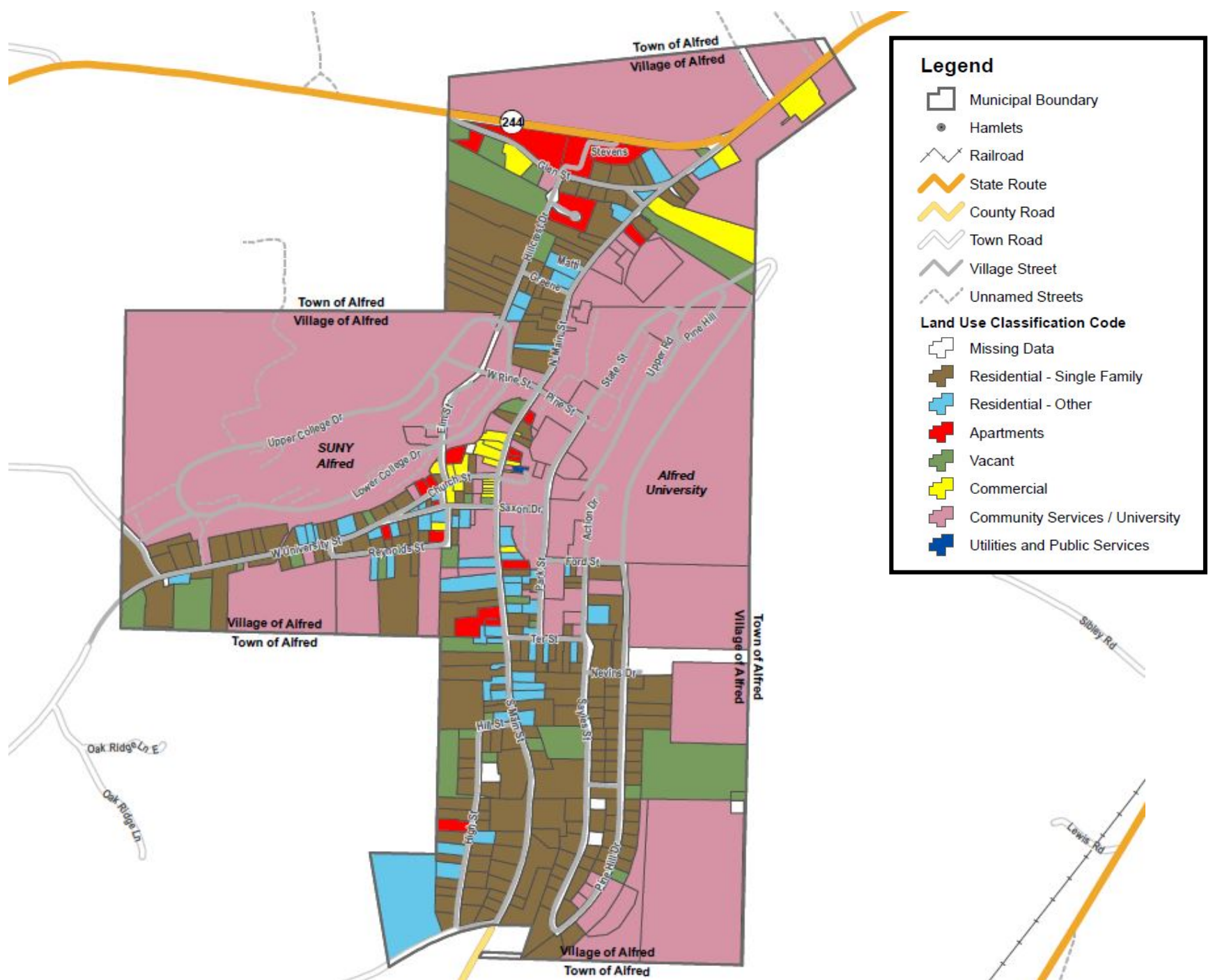
The project received funding from the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA), which recognized the innovative approach to enhancing efforts in multiple communities with

# Our Approach



## Project deliverables:

- Project website:  
[www.alleganycompplanschool.com](http://www.alleganycompplanschool.com)
- 15 classes (lecture, discussion, Q&A)
- Administrative tools
- Planning tools
- Resources
- Focused expertise on LEED-ND / sustainability
- Local analysis, demographic data, maps



# Process Tools



Quick start tools included:

- The Gantt Chart
- Public participation-level cost analysis
- Sample Community Survey
- LEED-ND checklist
- Sample Focus Group questions
- Infrastructure assessment worksheet
- The Conversation Map

# Process Tools



Included in the training:

- Sample marketing / announcement cards
- Visioning/participation tools (external resource)
- Implementation Matrix
- Sample plan outlines
- PESTLE Exercise



# Process Tools



## Comprehensive Plan Implementation Matrix Sample

Goal:	Objective:	Strategy:	Timeline:	Benchmark:	Responsibility:
To improve experience of visitors to community	Improve gateway appearance	Establish a committee of volunteers to adopt and care for gateway	Immediate	Committee Plan Development	T/V
		To provide funding for materials	May 2016	Town / Village Board Resolution	T/V
	Improve downtown sidewalks	Establish budget reserve account / program	Immediate (2016-2017 Budget)	Village Board Resolution	V
	Improve wayfinding (signage)	Apply for a DOT TEP grant	2016	Village Board Resolution	V
				Grant Application	V
		Establish reserve account for grant match or self-funding	2016-2017 Budget	Village Board Resolution	V
Goal 2	Objective 1	Strategy 1	Date	Benchmark	Resp
		Strategy 2	Date	Benchmark	Resp
	Objective 2	Strategy 1	Date	Benchmark	Resp
	Objective 3	Strategy 1	Date	Benchmark	Resp
				Benchmark	Resp
		Strategy 2	Date	Benchmark	Resp
	Objective 1	Strategy 1	Date	Benchmark	Resp

# Beyond the Classes...



## Included in the training:

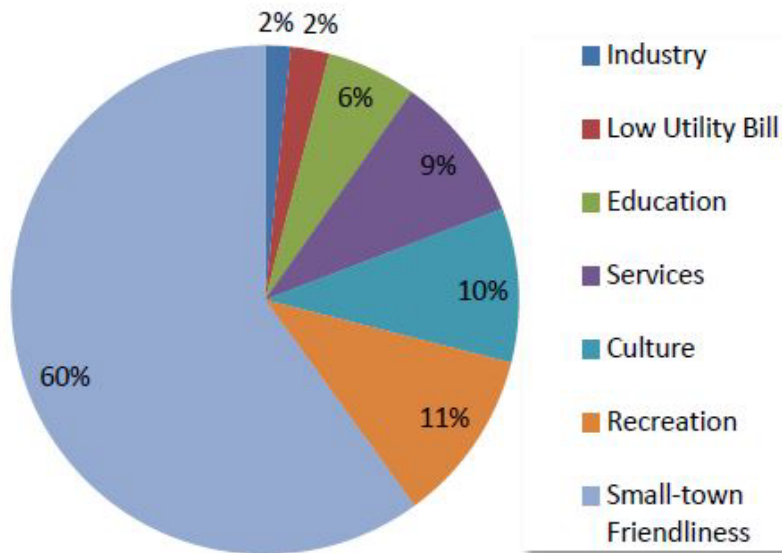
- One-on-one guidance
- Direct support
- As needed analysis / support
  - Survey result compilation
  - Infrastructure assessment review
- Assistance with documentation

# Beyond the Classes...



**MRB** | group

**The Most Important Values of Wellsville**



**Question 1 - Most Important Values**

Suggested Changes	Suggestions	Percentage
Small-town Friendliness	147	60
Recreation	27	11
Culture	24	10
Services	23	9
Education	14	6
Low Utility Bill	6	2
Industry	4	2
Total	245	100

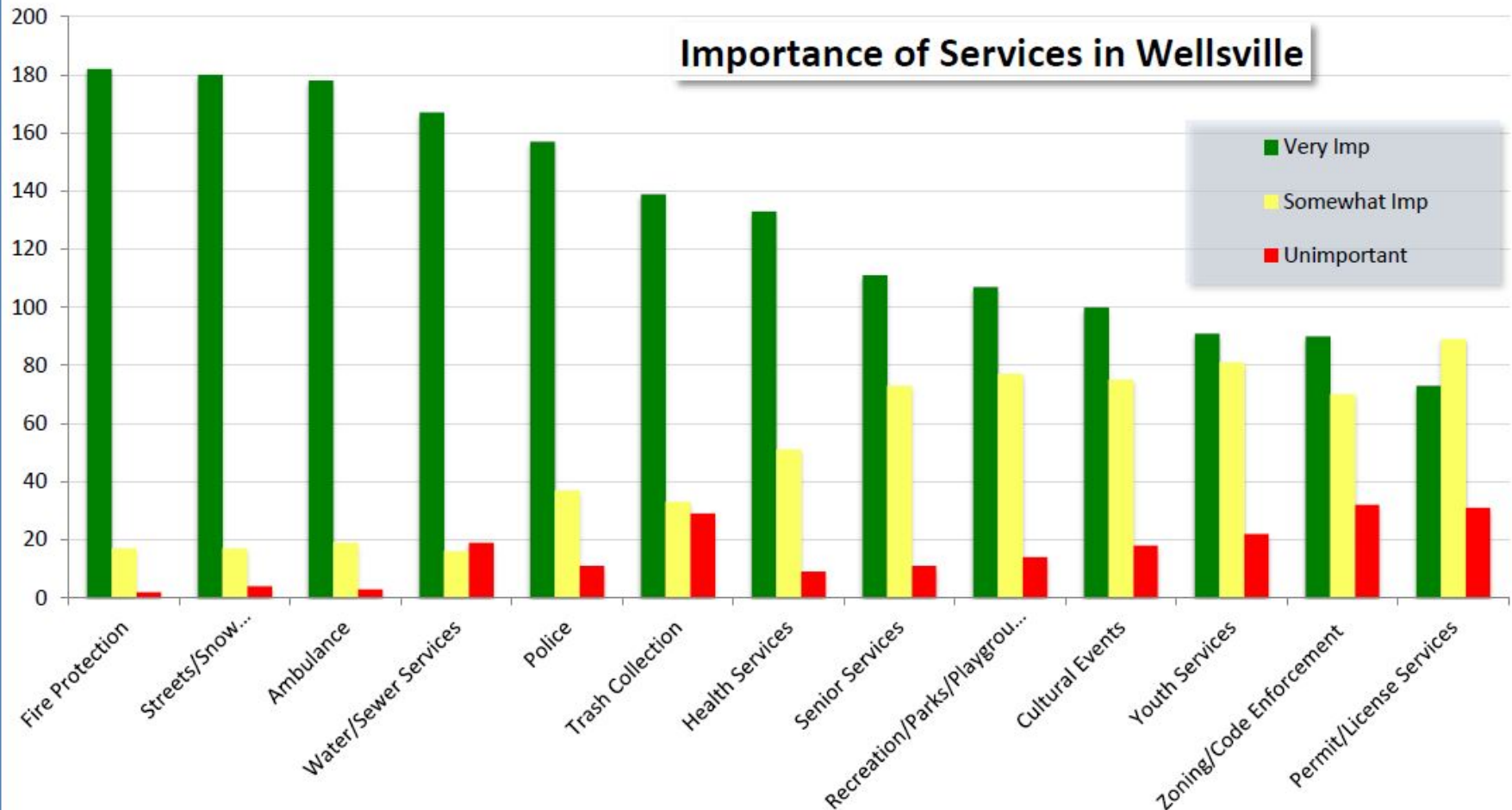


# Beyond the Classes...



**MRB** | group

## Importance of Services in Wellsville



# Benefits of Approach



There are several benefits associated with Kier's innovative approach:

- Less costly for each municipality
- Makes planning possible
- Communities utilize each others' experience
- Communities support each others' efforts
- Friendly competition inspires achievement
- Bonding experience both within and between communities
- Self-directed process allows communities to set the time-table

# Detriments of Approach

Negatives associated with approach:

- Self-directed process allows communities to set the time-table!!



# In Conclusion



We've seen some other (indirect) benefits:

- Participants mentioned utilizing tools in other public meetings – have commented on success and usefulness
- Each community has “found” new volunteers, resources
- An increased appreciation for what planning can reveal

# In Conclusion



- Understanding of character of the community
- Builds consensus
- Develops vision for future
- Legal justification for zoning / land use decisions
- Positions community for investment

# In Conclusion



**MRB** | *group*

The comprehensive plan process  
is a step towards

Self-analysis...

....municipal efficiency

Proactive planning...

...creating a future of  
your own making

Generating investment...

...improving your  
community's bottom line!

# Contact Info



Diana Smith, Senior Municipal Advisor  
Jane Nicholson, AICP, CFM  
**SmarterLocalGov** Team  
MRB Group

(585) 381-9250  
(315) 283-3751  
(315) 447-6002

[diana.smith@mrbgroup.com](mailto:diana.smith@mrbgroup.com)  
[jane.nicholson@mrbgroup.com](mailto:jane.nicholson@mrbgroup.com)

# Resources



## Sustainable Design + Green Communities:

U.S. EPA Smart Growth Guidelines for Sustainable Design & Development  
[https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/documents/sg\\_guidelines.pdf](https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/documents/sg_guidelines.pdf)

LEED for Neighborhood Development  
<https://www.usgbc.org/leed/rating-systems/neighborhood-development>

American Planning Association – Green Communities  
<https://www.planning.org/nationalcenters/green/>

American Society of Landscape Architects – Professional Practice: Green Infrastructure  
<https://www.asla.org/greeninfrastructure.aspx>

FEMA – Building Community Resilience with Nature-based Solutions: A Guide for Local Communities  
[https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-09/fema\\_Riskmap-nature-based-solutions-guide-2020\\_071520.pdf](https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-09/fema_Riskmap-nature-based-solutions-guide-2020_071520.pdf)