

Chapter I: Introduction

Since its pioneer days in the 1700s and its formal beginning in 1803, the Town of Guilderland has been an historic and unique locale. Mohican and Mohawk Indians used the clear waters of the Normanskill to fish and to barter downstream at the Dutch Trading Post near Fort Orange. By 1740, early Palatine and Dutch pioneers traveled the Schoharie Plank Road by stage coach and wagons on their westward journey and settled at the foot of the magnificent Helderberg Escarpment to build their homes because of the rich soil, abundance of timber and water power from the numerous streams.

Eighteenth Century Guilderland was a rural community. As the nineteenth Century turned, agriculture replaced forests, the Great Western Turnpike and railroads cut through the countryside bringing growth in small hamlets with post offices, stores, churches and schools as the Town flourished with the increased population.

Today, the western end of Guilderland is still mostly rural and residential with many houses of architectural significance remaining. The eastern end of Town has developed into a densely residential and commercial suburb with shopping mass, apartment complexes, business centers and a State University. Each century has wrought changes in the character of the community.

The diversity of today's land use in the Town is a great change from the earlier days of the stagecoach and wagon. Agricultural uses have diminished in favor of residential development. The proximity of the Town to Albany, Schenectady, and Troy and the advent of the automobile and associated highway construction have increased the popularity of the Town as a "good place to live." As a result, land values have risen and pressure increases to suburbanize the community; impacts on existing neighborhoods increase as surrounding lands develop, bringing more traffic, runoff, noise, and pollutants; infrastructure is having a difficult time keeping pace with demands; and finally and perhaps most importantly, the costs of providing community services, including public education, utilities, road maintenance and other infrastructure cannot be easily absorbed by the current tax rates and fees.

Fortunately, the past and current land use trends have not irreversibly impacted the Town's history, resources and character. A large portion of rural Guilderland remains. It is a high valued residential community. Most of the major stream corridors are still intact. Parklands have been designated and developed. Although threatened by development from all its surrounding communities, the Pine Bush remains an important and unique ecological feature. Many of the Town's historic structures remain and the views from the Helderberg Escarpment are still spectacular. But, most importantly, people still

care about their community and have been willing to devote their time and resources to identify the issues and develop a vision for the future.

The process by which a community establishes the programs and actions that lead to their desired vision is called comprehensive planning. As defined by Town Law (§ 272-a.2(a)), a comprehensive plan is the:

...materials, written and/or graphic, including but not limited to maps, charts, studies, resolutions, reports and other descriptive materials that identify the goals, objectives, principles, guidelines, policies, standards, devices and instruments for the immediate and long-range protection, enhancement, growth and development of the town located outside the limits of any incorporated village or city.

Comprehensive planning is the first step in an on-going process. The purpose of the Comprehensive Plan is to inventory the Town's resources based on existing data and to identify what additional data might be required to implement certain aspects of the plan; develop the framework to address future land use and other community issues through community outreach and formulation of a vision and goals and objectives; development of a series of recommendations and policies consistent with the goals and objectives; and to identify the steps necessary to implement the plan recommendations. Quite simply, the comprehensive plan is the information organizer. Although specific recommendations are provided that can be immediately translated into action, other means of achieving certain goals will require further detailed study.

A. Legislative Authority

The authority to conduct comprehensive planning and to adopt a comprehensive plan is granted to towns by the State Legislature. Adoption of a comprehensive plan by a town board requires that all town land use be in accordance with the plan. Furthermore, other governmental agencies must take the plan into consideration whenever their capital projects occur on land included in the town comprehensive plan. This provides a town with the appropriate guidance to review future projects and provides the essential background information and justification for amending or creating a zoning ordinance. The plan also provides developers/project sponsors with up-front guidance on where and how their projects can be developed, facilitating the site plan review process and providing early detection of potential land use conflicts.

B. SEQRA Compliance

In accordance with the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA) and Town Law (§ 272-a), adoption of the Town of Guilderland Comprehensive Plan by the Town Board is a Type 1 action subject to review under 6 NYCRR 617. Pursuant to Town Law § 272-a.8, this Plan also serves as a generic environmental impact statement.

The components of a generic environmental impact statement (GEIS), as outlined in 6 NYCRR 617.10 are included in this Plan as follows:

- Executive Summary= *Executive Summary* (following Acknowledgements)
- Project Description = *Introduction, Community Vision, Plan Recommendations*
- Environmental Setting = *Inventory & Analysis*
- Environmental Impact = *Plan Recommendations* (Potential Adverse & Beneficial Future Growth Impacts)
- Mitigation = *Plan Recommendations*
- Unavoidable Adverse Impacts = *Plan Recommendations*
- Alternatives = *alternatives*
- Recommendations/Thresholds = *Plan Recommendations*
- Growth-Inducing Aspects = *Plan Recommendations*

The evaluation of impacts and mitigation of a comprehensive plan is somewhat different than the typical environmental impact statement. This is because the plan and implementation recommendations of a comprehensive plan are typically beneficial or mitigative actions in response to the problems identified through the inventory and analysis and community outreach programs. This was very much the case for the Town of Guilderland. The primary issue facing Guilderland is the fact that the Town is zoned for significant growth and development in a manner that would promote sprawl and would have a detrimental impact on the character of the community, including the character and uniqueness of residential neighborhoods and the character and success of commercial development and other business enterprises. Uncontrolled growth would significantly impact the health of the natural environment, the ability to provide sufficient infrastructure, and the ability to pay for it all without creating a significant tax burden.

Fortunately, none of these impacts are unavoidable. Mitigation in the form of growth management and good planning, including the many programs and studies recommended in the Action Plan, will help the Town to direct growth in a beneficial manner that promotes the health, safety and welfare of the community and retains the qualities that residents have identified as important. Growth will occur in the Town that will result in unavoidable impacts to the environment. This can be better evaluated on a site specific level or as part of an area-wide GEIS. However, from a planning perspective, the recommendations presented herein and those resulting from further study are, in actuality, mitigation for the impacts caused by past and anticipated future development patterns. It should be noted that the Town's zoning, subdivision regulations, site plan review process, and dedicated staff and volunteers form a great base to work from and modify. Without these existing tools, the Town would have many more problems and would not be considered a desirable place to live and work as it is currently referred to by residents and the business community.

Much of the Plan Recommendations and the Action Plan tasks deal with the issue of growth inducing aspects. A significant example is the potential to provide municipal water and sewer to areas without utilities. Many people in Rural Guilderland have identified a need for water based on poor groundwater conditions. Supply of this service has many implications relative to growth and cost, requiring documentation and appropriate planning.

In an effort to respond to the many excellent comments received during the Draft GEIS comment period, a Final GEIS was prepared. The structure of the Final GEIS was not conducive for incorporation directly into the Comprehensive Plan; therefore, a separate document was prepared (*Town of Guilderland Comprehensive Plan 2000 Final Generic Environmental Impact Statement*, July 17, 2001, Clough Harbour & Associates LLP). Many comments were addressed by highlighting the changes to the text made in response to comments. All changes are reflected in this Final Comprehensive Plan.

Each of the comments made during the SEQR comment period were discussed during two televised meetings of the Comprehensive Plan Revision Committee (appointed by the Town Board to complete revisions to the Plan). All written correspondence received during the comment period as well as the public hearing record were provided for the Committee's review and discussion. This included comments on the Draft Plan made by members of the Comprehensive Plan Advisory Board and the Revision Task Force during a televised joint meeting. A table was created that identifies the Draft Plan recommendations for the major issues, comments raised during the joint meeting, and the recommended approach for addressing the comments. This table is provided in Appendix C of the Final GEIS.

A Statement of SEQR Findings has also been issued by the Guilderland Town Board and is on file in the Town Clerk's office.

Since the Comprehensive Plan is a programmatic document, site specific actions are not evaluated in the Draft and Final GEIS nor are there any significant changes in land use recommended at this time. However, the Plan/GEIS does evaluate the types of programs and studies necessary to provide key information.

The Town will need to evaluate each action relative to its significance. Many of the recommended future actions may involve significant land use changes that were not specifically addressed in the GEIS for the Comprehensive Plan. This, in itself would warrant further SEQR action in the form of a full Environmental Assessment Form and, if necessary, an EIS. The adoption of a Rural Guilderland Plan and all its associated components recommended in Chapter IV is an example of an action that would likely warrant further SEQR review.

Not all of the recommendations and action plan tasks are subject to SEQR. For example, initiation of dialogue with other municipalities and agencies, the study of water quality issues in Rural Guilderland, and other similar planning or

engineering studies that do not require formal action (i.e., adoption) by a board are specifically exempt from SEQR.

To clarify the process of identifying those actions that may require further SEQR review it is recommended that all actions by the Town Board, Planning Board, or Zoning Board relative to the implementation of the Comprehensive Plan that would involve the adoption of land use plans and policies or modifications of zoning and subdivision regulations and local laws should be reviewed pursuant to SEQR through the preparation of a full Environmental Assessment Form (EAF). If, upon review of the EAF, it is determined that the action will have no significant impact, a Negative Declaration can be issued, thus ending the SEQR process. If it appears that significant impact may occur and the impact and associated mitigation cannot be sufficiently addressed in parts 2 and 3 of the EAF, an EIS should be prepared. The EIS should take full advantage of the documentation already provided in the GEIS for this Comprehensive Plan.

Evaluation of the significance of any action relative to SEQR should include a thorough evaluation by the Lead Agency (in most cases the Town Board for the adoption of plans and other local regulatory amendments) of the consistency of the proposed land use plan or legislation with the recommendations of this Comprehensive Plan.