

Section 4: Primary Recommendations & Actions



INTRODUCTION

The following recommendations and strategies are intended to provide the town with a series of short- and long-term land use tools that can help the community realize its vision for rural Guilderland.

1. PROMOTE FARMING AND AGRICULTURE IN COLLABORATION WITH LANDOWNERS

The protection and enhancement of agriculture is a key component to maintaining the quality of life and special character of rural Guilderland. Promoting the maintenance and success of active farming preserves rural character and open space, limits impacts on schools and infrastructure, and provides for economic activity. For example, farms often utilize the same soils and resources necessary for residential construction (prime farm soils are generally the most “buildable” soils). As a result, ensuring that farms remain viable can help reduce the town’s overall build-out of residential development and growth.

Guilderland’s farms create an enriching and beautiful landscape for residents and visitors. They contribute to the break from urbanism to the east, the greenbelt of open space around the Village of Altamont, and the overall character of rural Guilderland. The following strategies are designed to protect and celebrate active farms and farmland in rural Guilderland while focusing on landowner flexibility and equity.

1.A. PROVIDE INCENTIVES

A series of short and long term incentives would help reduce the cost of farming, provide potential funds for investment in the farm operation, and reduce development pressure. For example, a **term easement program** would help active farming by reducing tax responsibilities in exchange for assurances that the land would not be used for non-farm purposes for a determined period of time (e.g., 10 years). The term easement could be

Primary Recommendations:

1. Protect farmlands in collaboration with land owners (e.g., ensure that farms remain economically and physically viable).
2. Protect the community’s water supply.
3. Protect significant natural resource areas as open space for wildlife habitat, scenic quality, and low-impact recreation where appropriate.
4. Maintain and enhance rural Guilderland’s unique sense of place.
5. Manage growth to maintain rural Guilderland character and quality of life.
6. Enhance human

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used to encourage landowners of agricultural, open space, or historic and cultural resources to maintain their lands free of development.

I.B ESTABLISH A CONSERVATION PROGRAM

A local **conservation easement and purchase of development rights program** could be used to ensure that certain lands, perhaps those under the most serious development pressure, are permanently protected as agricultural areas. For example, the Town of New Scotland, using local and state funds, purchased the development rights to Indian Ladder Farms to help conserve this important community resource.

Funds for this type of program in Guilderland could be generated through establishment of a municipal capital reserve account dedicated to open space protection. These local dollars would help in acquisition efforts and could serve as a match for state and federal grants.

The town could also initiate an **amenity zoning or transfer of development rights program** that moves the development potential from one area identified for conservation to another that has been designated as a growth zone. In this scenario, the total development remains the same. However, density is transferred to appropriate locations while owners of conservation lands receive payment for keeping lands permanently free of development.



1.B.I ESTABLISH FARMLAND PROTECTION PRIORITIES

In general farmland protection priorities should focus in areas where these activities can have the most impact in terms of cost, amount of resource protected, and amount of development pressure. While some of these concepts are discussed above, the town should consider the following farmland protection priorities:

- Larger farms with a mix of land resources and soils of statewide importance
- Highly visible farms (e.g., those located on heavily traveled roads)

- Farmland threatened for conversion due to development pressure and intergenerational transfer concerns
- Projects that will rate highly with state and federal funding programs
- Projects where the landowner has provided some form of bargain sale (even minor)

1.C ENCOURAGE AGRICULTURAL ENHANCEMENT PROJECTS

Farming is an economic activity – the sale of local products contributes to the area economy and perhaps most importantly, since the town’s farms are locally-owned, profits are more likely to stay in the community (compared with national retail operations for example). In addition to protecting farmland, farm operations should be cultivated through grants, loans, and other programs to help entrepreneurs be successful. For example, the town could foster creative entrepreneurship activities such as “agri-tourism,” value added initiatives, or diversification of product (Indian Ladder Farms is a perfect example of a farm bringing people to the farm to increase and diversify sales). The majority of this assistance is provided through Cornell Cooperative Extension. However, the town could provide grant writing services and help connect farmers to available local, state, and federal resources. Another way the town can help enhance the economic viability of local farms is to ensure that the town’s zoning code is not overly restrictive and allows for innovation (e.g., recreation uses, small-scale commercial that is in keeping with the character of the area, etc.).

1.C.I PROVIDE ALTERNATIVES TO LANDOWNERS

Agriculture is an important part of what makes rural Guilderland a special place. The recommendations within this section highlight some of the ways in which the town can help farmers keep farming – assistance with grants, tax incentives, and purchase of development rights for example. However, the town can also show this support by allowing for economic development opportunities that enhance the community. One option currently being considered would allow for commercial development



An aerial photograph of Indian Ladder Farms in the town of New Scotland shows protected active farmlands that help to support a very successful and diversified retail market based upon agritourism

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through the establishment of new “Country Hamlets.” The Country Hamlet would allow a variety of commercial and housing types in areas that have or can provide community infrastructure. These new hamlets would be surrounded by open space (for example, agriculture, parks, and natural areas depending on the needs of the landowner) and could help grow rural Guilderland in a way that respects and enhances the unique characteristics of the area.

In addition to the country hamlet, the town should review the permitted uses within the agricultural district and consider allowing other options for commercial growth including farm support operations such as agricultural processing facilities as well as expanded home-based businesses.

1.D PROMOTE AWARENESS

Community support for farmers is an essential component for a successful local agricultural economy. Residents who are familiar with the importance of farming and standard practices are less likely to complain about inconveniences related to agricultural operations (e.g., tractors on roads, farm odors) and more likely to support farmland protection efforts. To increase local awareness, the town should formulate links between farmers, consumers, and the community as a whole to help raise reciprocal awareness on the importance of preserving working farmlands. A few specific activities to consider include:

- Promote farmers’ markets, farm tours and pick-your-own operations
- Identify opportunities to connect locally-grown products with schools (farm2school)
- Ensure that new residents receive information regarding conflicts between farms and residential uses, particularly in agricultural districts where notification is required (NYS Dept. of Agriculture and Markets Law, Article 25AA Sec. 310: Disclosure)

2. PROTECT WATER SUPPLY

Quality of life in rural Guilderland is closely tied to the protection of water quality and capacity. Excluding the Village of Altamont, many residents within the study

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area do not have access to public water and sewage services and rely on private wells and septic systems. As a result, even the smallest land use planning decisions as well as the actions of individual landowners play vital roles in the protection of water resources and quality of drinking water.

2.A. ENHANCE THE TOWN'S STRATEGY TO PROTECT DRINKING WATER QUALITY

Land use and development decisions as well as daily activities can result in a multitude of adverse impacts to the natural environment and water quality. In an effort to reduce non-point source water pollution, the town adopted, and is implementing, the EPA's Phase 2 Stormwater Regulations. Nevertheless, to deal with the impacts from such a diverse set of issues the town should continue to expand its local and regional partnerships in developing a comprehensive strategy to protect water quality. Components of this effort could include:

- Continued implementation of EPA Phase 2 stormwater management requirements and standards
- Enhancement of municipal stream and watershed regulations. This could include among other options, larger setbacks from streams (possibly based on stream type).
- Continued protection of sensitive environmental areas (floodplains, wetlands, steep slopes) through existing buffer regulations and utilization of new conservation subdivision requirements
- Establishment of requirements and/or incentives to encourage a reduction in impervious surfaces in new development
- Encouragement of low impact development practices (e.g., control erosion from construction, onsite management and treatment of stormwater runoff)
- Public outreach and education regarding the impacts of daily activities on water quality
- Ensure that new development does not adversely impact existing well and water supply systems
- Reduction in the overall density of development throughout the rural Guilderland study area through Rural 3 and Rural 5 zoning districts.

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- Encouragement of whole farm planning and best management practices, particularly in areas near sensitive water resources (e.g., Watervliet Reservoir and feeder streams). Opportunities for a cost-share program with the City of Watervliet to fund these projects and programs should be explored. The town, along with its regional partners, should seek funding for these efforts through state and federal non-point source pollution programs.
- Support of state and federal actions to remediate contamination at the Northeast Industrial Park.
- Continued partnership with the Capital District Regional Planning Commission.

3. PROTECT SIGNIFICANT NATURAL RESOURCE AREAS

At the foundation of the rural Guilderland area is a thriving environment of large tracts of woodlands, scenic views, wooded hills and ridges, streams, ponds, and wetlands, and diverse wildlife habitats. In addition to working agriculture, these resources are some of the most significant contributing factors to the unique character of rural Guilderland. While current town regulations form an excellent base for protection, expanded efforts are needed to ensure that these features are maintained as the town grows. In addition to water quality protection efforts discussed above, the key elements of the town's natural resources program should focus on:

- **Conservation of large tracts of woodlands** to avoid fragmentation of the town's "big woods." A particular focus of these efforts should be the targeting of large, unbroken tracts of wooded areas and stream corridors.
- **Protection of scenic, wooded hills and ridges** from significant development.
- **Maintenance of wildlife habitat**

To promote these efforts, Guilderland should work closely with interested and willing landowners, local land trusts such as the Albany Land Conservancy and other partners to identify potential conservation projects and seek funding opportunities.

4. MAINTAIN AND ENHANCE RURAL GUILDERLAND'S UNIQUE SENSE OF PLACE

Rural Guilderland's cultural characteristics and qualities help define its unique "sense of place" or identity. These features include rural corridors and roads, historic buildings and sites, the Village of Altamont and small hamlets, and the open, rural character of the western part of Guilderland. As the town grows and changes, special attention must be paid to the treatment of these areas and features. Future growth in rural Guilderland should find a balance between landowner needs and flexibility and maintenance/enhancement of the area's unique sense of place.

4.A. PROMOTE AND MAINTAIN THE SCENIC RESOURCES OF RURAL CORRIDORS AND ROADS

Traveling through rural Guilderland along scenic roads provides a pleasant experience and opportunity to view the area's wonderful vistas, farmland, open space, and history. Over time, even small-scale development can result in serious detriment to the scenic qualities of rural roads and corridors. Slowly, dramatic views, unfolding along rolling hills are replaced with driveways, new homes, and the loss of rural character. However, there are opportunities to grow and change while maintaining or even enhancing those qualities that make the town special. For example, new development in the countryside can blend into the landscape in a manner similar to historic growth patterns. These objectives can be most easily accomplished through the adherence to **Design Guidelines** for rural development and the use of **Conservation Subdivision** practices for larger developments.

4.B. PROVIDE GREENBELT AREAS AROUND HAMLETS AND BETWEEN DEVELOPMENTS AND SETTLEMENTS

One of the most unique features of the Village of Altamont and the hamlets of Dunnsville and Meadowdale is that they have a distinct edge. There is a discernable end to the urbanized area and beginning to open space, farmland, and countryside. Open space or greenbelts provide relief

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between settled areas and help each hamlet or settlement maintain its unique identity as an individual place. This should not be interpreted to mean that these areas should not grow. Rather, they should grow in accordance with a plan for development and open space conservation. Ultimately, greenbelt areas will be defined through the development and conservation process and protected through permanent conservation easements.

4.C. ENSURE THAT RURAL GUILDERLAND MAINTAINS STRONG VISUAL “COUNTRYSIDE GATEWAYS” ALONG ITS MAIN CORRIDORS INTO THE AREA

Rural Guilderland is quite distinct from the urbanized eastern sections that continue the suburban-style of development characterized by western Albany and Crossgates Mall. In contrast, rural Guilderland serves as a pleasant getaway and break from intense development, traffic and noise. It is important to maintain the boundary between urban and rural, the greenbelt and “countryside gateways” that welcome residents and travelers into western Guilderland.

4.D. PROTECT HISTORIC RESOURCES

History is abundant in rural Guilderland. This wealth of historic buildings and sites – predominately single dwellings and agricultural fields and related structures – contributes to the area’s unique character, identity, and special sense of place. The majority of these resources are privately owned, located along rural roads and corridors, and are considered particularly sensitive to the impacts of development. The town already has a strong track record of celebrating and encouraging the protection of its historic and cultural resources. These efforts could be further enhanced through **establishment of a term easement program** to encourage property owners to maintain the historic integrity of these resources. This program could be combined with the term easement program recommended for farmland as well as pre-existing state and federal programs that provide funding for rehabilitation for historic resources of state and national significance.

5. MANAGE GROWTH TO MAINTAIN RURAL GUILDERLAND'S CHARACTER AND QUALITY OF LIFE

Rural Guilderland will continue to grow and change. However, the town's existing land use regulations do not sufficiently contribute to realization of the community's vision for rural Guilderland or protect the area's unique sense of place. Now is the opportunity to plan for change and ensure that future development will be in keeping with the vision and goals for rural Guilderland. The following strategies should be applied to the study area as appropriate:

5.A. MINIMIZE THE INTENSITY OF NEW DEVELOPMENT THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRYSIDE

If all development was allowed to maximize lot sizes and density in accordance with the town's current zoning regulations, rural Guilderland's future build-out would result in approximately 6,600 new units and 16,000 new residents. While a lack of needed infrastructure will likely prohibit such intense development, the community's vision is not adequately expressed through existing zoning regulations that allow for this type of growth.

The development intensity allowed by the town's current zoning ordinance (specifically, the Agricultural Zone) should be reduced to more closely match the capacity of the environment and the community's vision for appropriate growth. To work towards realization of the rural Guilderland vision and the goals and objectives of this plan the town should establish three new districts that generally match the land management sub-areas described in Section 3 of this plan. In addition, each new district should include modified use and development intensities. Incentives for conservation of important open space resources could be allowed to provide flexibility. For the purpose of minimizing the impact of development throughout the study area, the town should consider reducing the average intensity of development for each sub-district as follows (currently, the allowed average density in most of rural Guilderland is one home for every two acres):

- Settles Hill: an overall approximate average of one home for every five acres
- Helderberg Escarpment: an overall approximate average of one home for every five acres

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- Valley area: an overall approximate average of one home for every three acres

In general, to prevent adverse impacts to the environment, public infrastructure (water or sewer) should only be extended to areas of rural Guilderland where these zoning and land use strategies are in place.

5.B. RECOGNIZE THE UNIQUENESS OF EACH SUB-AREA

For the most part, the study area is zoned “agricultural” which requires a two-acre minimum lot size. This uniform district does not recognize the unique features of each sub-area (Settles Hill, Escarpment, Watervliet Reservoir, etc.) and allows for an unrealistic and inappropriate level of development. In contrast to one all-encompassing district, the town should work towards setting up individual districts that recognize the unique features and appropriate level of development for each district.

5.C. UTILIZE A CONSERVATION DESIGN APPROACH FOR SITING ALL NEW TYPES OF DEVELOPMENT

New development can have a major impact on the resources and features that the town’s residents consider special and unique. In order to allow for an appropriate level of development that does not adversely impact rural Guilderland’s sense of place, all significantly-sized development in the rural, scenic, open countryside landscape should utilize the **conservation subdivision** approach for site planning and layout. In addition to protecting scenic views, as discussed above, this methodology will help maintain important water resources, provide for usable open space, and generally ensure that development considers the natural environment as the key component to site layout, not the maximization of units according to minimum lot sizes and setback requirements.

5.D. ESTABLISH FLEXIBLE DENSITY STANDARDS TO RESPECT LANDOWNER EQUITY

In general, individual project densities are less of a concern than the overall reduction of development intensity across rural Guilderland (a reduction in

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the build-out). For example, in those parts of town with sewer, water and roadway infrastructure in place, a higher level of density can be allowed as a trade-off for the provision of other public amenities such as open space, parks, or other community needs. One method to accomplish this is the use of **sliding scale zoning**, a technique that rewards high quality development through density bonuses. Using the sliding scale approach, projects that protect community-identified resources on the site (such as views and wildlife habitats) or include appropriate infrastructure would be allowed a higher overall density compared with projects that did not make similar efforts. This provides landowners with flexibility to develop at low densities while meeting minimum requirements or at higher density through high quality site design.

5.E. FOCUS DEVELOPMENT IN AREAS BEST SUITED TO ACCOMMODATE CHANGE

Future development within rural Guilderland should be focused in areas that are most appropriate and suited to accommodate growth and change. Some of the key “ingredients” to consider include accessibility to water and sewer services, major roads, and existing growth zones such as the Village of Altamont.

5.F. ALLOW FOR A FLEXIBILITY OF COMMERCIAL USES

Entrepreneurs looking to expand the local economic base and create jobs should be encouraged to establish operations that fit into the environment and character of rural Guilderland. To encourage this type of new economic growth, the town should allow for a flexibility of commercial uses, beyond what is allowed under existing zoning. This flexibility should be considered in cases where the development or project sponsor can provide community enhancements such as permanent protection of open space, public access to trails, or other needed amenities.

5.G. PROMOTE NEW HAMLET DEVELOPMENTS/SETTLEMENTS TO FOSTER A UNIQUE, ATTRACTIVELY DESIGNED, AND HIGH QUALITY PLACE

New developments should be designed to be compact, walkable, provide for and/or allow a mix of land uses including neighborhood-scale commercial, a variety of housing types and options, meaningful public

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spaces, and architecture that is consistent with the town's historic building styles. This can be accomplished through establishment of **new hamlet districts or traditional neighborhood zones** that allow these types of development as well as associated design guidelines that provide assistance in terms of street layout, site planning, and architectural styles.

6. ENHANCE HUMAN CONNECTIONS TO THE LAND

The rural Guilderland area provides the community (and region) with unique opportunities for education, recreation, and general enjoyment of the outdoors such as the popular informal trail networks and pathways for horseback riding; Tawasentha, Thatcher, and other state and local parks; golf courses and country clubs; and the variety of recreation facilities for team sports and athletics. Building off of these resources and previous planning efforts and success the town should work to:

- Provide for enhanced **community/pedestrian connections** throughout rural Guilderland. These pedestrian connections should follow natural features and connect residential areas with parks, other recreation areas, and commercial centers.
- Enhance **low-impact recreation** opportunities, particularly those uses that do not adversely impact or require significant modification of the natural environment (e.g., horseback riding trails, not amusement parks). To achieve these objectives (pedestrian connections and low-impact recreation), the town should investigate opportunities to formalize existing trail networks through a landowner incentive program, expand the scope of the Guilderland Pathways initiative to include rural Guilderland,
- Encourage establishment of new **educational facilities and resources**. The rural Guilderland area includes an abundance of opportunities for learning about the natural environment. Working with existing educational groups and organizations (e.g., Cooperative Extension, 4-H, etc.), the town should continue to work towards the establishment of new facilities and educational resources for the community.

7. ESTABLISH LAND CONSERVATION GOALS

Protection, maintenance, and enhancement of the special character and unique features of rural Guilderland will require long-term dedication and commitment. Land protection and conservation efforts typically require several stages of planning, implementation, and monitoring. In order to obtain and then maintain public support, keep up momentum, and to work towards the realization of the town's long-term vision for rural Guilderland, a series of short, medium and long-term goals for conservation of open space, farmland, and rural character should be established. The following outline includes recommended land conservation goals and an implementation schedule.

Short-term: 1 – 2 years

- Support surrounding municipalities in application for grant funds for development of a Route 20 corridor study from I-88 to route 146. The Capital District Transportation Committee's Linkages program could serve as a source for planning funds.
- Establishment of tax abatement, term easement, and other incentive programs for protection of rural character (agriculture, historic and cultural resources, special natural areas and environmental features).
- Investigate and solidify landowner interest to work towards a farmland protection grant and project.
- Permanent protection of a portion of the town's "big woods" and/or natural areas.
- Amendment of zoning ordinance to include a conservation subdivision section (replacing cluster).
- Amendment of zoning ordinance to include an option to establish new hamlets to be consistent with the design and land use principles of traditional neighborhoods such as those found in the Village of Altamont, other local hamlets.

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- Amendment of zoning ordinance to establish three new districts to match the rural Guilderland land management sub-areas (Settles Hill, Helderberg Escarpment, and Valley).

Medium-term: 3 – 5 years

- Permanent protection of 500 acres of active farmland (cumulative acreage within rural Guilderland).
- Permanent protection of 500 acres of “big woods” and natural areas (cumulative acreage within rural Guilderland).

Long-term: 6+ years

- Permanent protection of 4,000 acres of the rural Guilderland area consisting of a variety of woodlands and agricultural resources.

Please note that land protection goals will most likely be accomplished through implementation of a wide variety of programs and efforts (as described within this plan).