



Niagara Communities Comprehensive Plan Public Information Meeting #1 Meeting Notes

DATE: February 27, 2008
PLACE: Niagara County Community College, Fine Arts Theater, F155
TIME: 7:00 – 8:30PM

ATTENDEES: Clough Harbour & Associates planners, community representatives, and members of the general public.

PURPOSE: To introduce the project to the public, to discuss the scope of the project and the focus areas of the plan, to provide an update on data collection efforts and other preliminary work conducted to date, and to discuss inclusion of stakeholders in the planning process.

MINUTES:

1. Walt Kalina began the meeting at approximately 7:00 pm by introducing himself as the project manager from Clough Harbour & Associates LLP (CHA), the consulting firm hired by Niagara County to facilitate the planning process. He also introduced the project, describing it as the first comprehensive plan focused solely on issues in Niagara County, and discussed the contents of the “Summary of the Planning Process for the Niagara Communities Comprehensive Plan” brochure that was made available, which is intended as a summary of the major aspects of the comprehensive plan and overall planning process.
2. Mr. Kalina utilized a PowerPoint presentation to provide a detailed description of the Plan’s legal basis under New York State General Municipal Law, its goals, and the overall planning process to be used in developing the Plan. Some of the key points included:
 - The primary goals of the planning process are to provide better decision-making with respect to managing growth and development, strengthening the local economy, improving services and infrastructure, coordinating and prioritizing capital improvements, and enhancing quality of life. The goals will be addressed in through five (5) focus areas of the Plan: Land Use & Environment; Economic Development; Public Services, Facilities, and Infrastructure; Education; and Health & Safety.
 - The planning process is currently in Phase I, information collection and review of previous planning initiatives, which will take advantage and be inclusive of plans, projects, and studies already undertaken in the county.
 - The process being used is unique because the Plan is not being developed from the “top down” as other counties may have done; instead it is being developed from the “bottom up” using input from citizens, stakeholders, and local municipalities. This includes the 12 towns, 3 cities, 5 villages,

and 3 Native American reservations as well as a growing list of over 150 stakeholder groups invited to participate in the planning process.

- A Stakeholder Communities Plan Steering Committee has been formed to get local municipalities involved, to provide a means of exchanging information, and to encourage broader dialogue on planning issues.
- The process used to develop the plan is important; stakeholders will help facilitate the recommendations of the Plan and employing a “bottom up” process will help foster a commitment to its use.
- This Plan will not conflict with communities’ “home rule” authority or interfere with city, town, or village governments’ roles or responsibilities; instead it will incorporate and build upon the visions, goals and objectives, and plans of each community. One of the goals of the planning process is to achieve greater consistency across municipal boundaries as challenges increasingly cannot be solved by individual communities alone.
- The Plan will build upon previous planning initiatives and these initiatives will be reviewed, summarized, documented, and referenced in the Plan.
- Public meetings will be held on the fourth Wednesday of April, June and August 2008 at Niagara County Community College, and a public hearing is tentatively scheduled for October 1, 2008.

3. The meeting was opened up to questions. The following constitutes a brief summary of questions about the planning process. This is not intended as a complete transcript of the proceedings. This meeting was held as a general public information meeting, not as a public hearing. Comments on the planning process, while important, will be included in subsequent documentation. Questions and answers have been paraphrased and attempts have been made to include all questions within these notes. Questions were raised by members of the public who, in general, did not identify themselves. These questions were posed to and answered by Walt Kalina who facilitated the meeting as Project Manager.

Q: Does this Plan require the unanimous approval of the County’s municipalities?

A: No, we’re striving for consensus among the stakeholder communities, but adoption is up to the County Legislature as authorized by New York State law in preparing a county comprehensive plan.

Q: How will the project’s website be set up to provide feedback to stakeholders?

A: The website will allow members of the public to e-mail comments and questions. Meeting notices, agendas, notes of meetings, draft sections of the Plan once available will be provided for public review by way of the County’s website.

Q: What is your firm’s planning experience and what is your personal planning experience?

A: I have 30 years of experience as a planner, 8 of which have been with CHA. I am a certified planner trained in community planning. I have worked on more than 30 different comprehensive plans.

Q: What timeframe will be analyzed in this Plan? Ten, twenty, thirty years?

A: Typically plans look out 20 years, but realistically a 10-year outlook is probably most practical. Recommendations will be based on “short-term” (3 – 5 years) and “long-term” (5 - 10+ years) timeframes.

Q: How were members of the Steering Committee selected?

A: Steering Committee representatives were asked by elected officials at the city, town, village and Tribal levels to participate on the committee.

Q: Why are consultants other than CHA involved in this process, and will this result in greater expense?

A: The two sub-consultants each have their specialty in the planning process: Basile Baumann Prost Cole Associates (BBPC) will help address complicated economic development and financial questions. Community Oriented Geography is an expert in the use of *CommunityViz* GIS-software which will be used during this process. The fees paid to these firms come out of the fee paid to CHA; there is no additional fee for using their expertise. The process is funded by a New York State Qualities Communities grant and other grant monies.

Q: The presentation did not provide much substance or substantive recommendations.

A: The planning process is in its earliest phase of collecting information and reviewing materials, including previous planning initiatives. Recommendations will come at a later point in the process.

Q: Why is a civil engineering firm preparing this planning document?

A: CHA provides a full range of services, including community planning. The firm has an extensive planning resume. CHA is a multi-disciplined firm providing engineering, planning, landscape architecture, design and environmental services.

Q: What have some of the results been of past plans like this?

A: There haven't been many plans like this at the county level, and that's part of the statewide problem. Not many counties have comprehensive plans. In all, approximately 17 or so of the State's 62 counties have comprehensive plans.

Q: What platform will be used to continue the dialogue related to the Plan after its preparation?

A: This has not been determined yet.

Q: What is needed is more education of decision-makers.

A: Education is part of the process, including the preparation of the “Planning Process” brochure [copies of which were available at the meeting] and a second brochure that is currently being prepared that will provide information on the County’s services.

Q: Will this Plan look at the effects of having multiple school districts in the County? Consolidating school districts will result in lower taxes: school taxes are 70 percent of all taxes.

A: BBPC, one of the two sub-consultants working on the Plan, will be looking at the County’s educational institutions. This will be considered as part of the process.

Q: Why does all material related to this Plan refer to it as the “Niagara Communities Comprehensive Plan,” rather than the “Niagara County Comprehensive Plan” as it was called last fall? When and why was the decision made to change the Plan’s name?

A: The process is meant to encourage participation from every municipality within the County and that is why a decision was made to reflect that community participation in the name of the plan.

Q: Why is Erie County involved in this process?

A: Erie County is a stakeholder, as are all other adjacent counties and several other State and local governments. However, this plan is not part of the Erie-Niagara Regional Partnership’s planning program. It is solely a Niagara County plan.

Q: Natural resources have often been forgotten in Niagara County. Will someone with environmental interests be involved in the Steering Committee?

A: We will ensure that you are involved in the process.

Q: If the Plan is going to look at issues like farmland preservation, will that restrict a farmer’s right to sell his property?

A: The County has no jurisdiction nor does it have any intention to restrict a farmer’s right to sell land. The issue of zoning and land use is a local issue of communities under “home rule”.

Q: The Plan does not seem to have a lot of “teeth” in it.

A: The Plan is not law, it’s a guide. It’s as good as the people who use it. If it is ignored, it sits on a shelf. It is up to the communities in the County to utilize its recommendations and perhaps include them in their own plans and in their zoning.

Q: Why does the SEQRA process include a public hearing in October? Will this be a public hearing conducted after completion of the Plan?

A: This will be a public hearing and an opportunity to comment on a draft of the plan: the process will not be over at this point. Comments on the draft plan will then be considered in a final version of the plan, prior to possible adoption.

Q: Will minutes from these meetings be available on the website?

A: Yes.

4. The meeting ended at approximately 8:45 p.m.