

I. INTRODUCTION

In the years since the completion of its 1973 Master Plan, Rockland County has experienced growth and dynamic changes that have made it today a county of diverse communities, renowned regional attractions and thriving businesses. With nearly one third of its 176-square-mile land area consisting of parkland and a striking landscape that includes 40 miles of Hudson River waterfront and more than 600 lakes and ponds, it is a county of astounding beauty. Quality of life has been enhanced by preservation measures taken in previous generations and through the ongoing commitment of the County's residents and leaders to protect natural resources. Its wealth of open space and its rich legacy of historic sites in village centers and along country lanes gives Rockland a special character that is remarkable considering the County's size, proximity to New York City and its otherwise suburban development patterns.

Rockland County faces increasing challenges related to planning and managing future change as the County enters the next millennium. The County has gone from being an outer fringe suburb of New York City to being an inner ring suburban area. The presence of Harriman State Park creates a considerable separation between Rockland County and further distant communities in Orange County that ensures that Rockland will remain attractive for New York City commuters while also developing its own economic base. However, the County has also increasingly become a pass-through area for commuters to Manhattan, commuters traveling between Bergen County (NJ), Orange County and White Plains, and for regional truck traffic, raising concerns related to the environment and community character. Maintaining the distinctive qualities that give Rockland a "sense of place" while promoting controlled growth, limiting additional sprawl and providing additional facilities and living opportunities will be critical to the County's future.

The County is comprised of five towns and 19 villages. While there are long standing historic villages such as Spring Valley, Nyack and Suffern, and villages formed in the 1980s such as New Hempstead and Wesley Hills, a more recent trend of village formulation to either prevent or permit higher density housing has fostered fragmentation of local decision making. This local fragmentation has implications for implementation of a County-wide policy and visions of a County-wide plan. The County's vacant land resources, other than designated parks, is also very limited, making its utilization crucial to the overall quality of life of County residents. Development is often being proposed on smaller and smaller infill parcels with environmental constraints engendering a high degree of public concern.

Rockland County: River to Ridge *A Plan for the 21st Century* is a culmination of a year-long planning process involving citizens, County agencies, municipal officials and community groups. With an emphasis on preserving residential areas and open space, creating additional amenities for residents and visitors, building selectively on the strengths of its downtown areas, identifying areas for business development and integrating transportation initiatives, the Comprehensive Plan

provides guidance for the County's growth and a framework for achieving sustainable development over the next several decades. Measures recommended by the Plan will permit the County to evolve and increase the efficiency of its roadways and infrastructure systems while protecting the character of its neighborhoods, preserving open space and increasing opportunities for the enjoyment of its valuable waterfront, its downtown cultural attractions, and its sense of community.

The **Rockland County: River to Ridge** Plan also highlights some of the recent innovative efforts of Rockland communities in the areas of zoning, environmental protection and economic development. By doing so, the Plan encourages reasonable growth, compatible land uses and the preservation of existing resources through partnership and shared vision.

A. Plan Structure

The **Rockland County: River to Ridge** Plan is divided into two main components: the Land Use Plan and the Policy Plan. The Land Use Plan forms the structural context for the overall plan, identifying area densities, development patterns and proposed land uses. It serves as a land use guide for public agencies and for localities which have jurisdiction over land use and zoning matters. The Land Use Plan also provides a framework for public investment and improvements, promoting linkages between now disparate centers and activity nodes and embodying the future vision of the County from a physical layout perspective. Suggested land use guidelines of Chapter IV of the Plan distinguish policies appropriate for specific types of land uses and areas which have been defined and identified, such as traditional downtown centers, suburban hubs, corridors and natural areas. The Plan provides a regional perspective that encourages municipalities to control future intensities of uses in certain locations where appropriate, while promoting positive change and fostering interconnectivity in others.

The second major plan component is a section on Policy Plans. These address recommendations for five major policy areas that include: (1) transportation, (2) housing, (3) open space and environment, (4) economic development and (5) the waterfront. Whereas the Land Use Plan is oriented towards the physical layout of the County, the Policy Plans are a strategic and programmatic guide for enhancing the County's transportation systems, housing resources, open space network and future economic development. While there are direct relationships between the Policy Plans and the Land Use Plan, the Policy Plans address more than physical form, emphasizing the interrelationship of the five focus areas and land use issues.

B. The Planning Process

A key factor in defining the vision of the **Rockland County: River to Ridge** Plan has been the participation of citizens, community leaders and local groups. Following a kick-off

meeting in November 1997, a series of public meetings were held involving the County Planning Board, a Citizens Advisory Council, the Rockland Municipal Planning Federation, County legislators and Town and Village officials. These meetings were used to identify critical issues and to formulate initial strategies.

The combined County Planning Board and Citizens Advisory Council acted throughout the planning process as the major advisory group. Members of the Citizens Advisory Council were selected to participate on two of four action plan subcommittees examining the Policy Plan topics of transportation, housing, open space and economic development. Although the County Planning Board served primarily as the Land Use Committee, members participated freely with the various subcommittees.

Numerous interviews with agencies and municipal officials also helped to form the basis of the Plan's recommendations. These included discussions with village mayors and town supervisors which helped to identify issues of importance at the local level. Meetings with service providers and local, County and State agencies provided a regional perspective as well as a detailed background on systems such as transportation, drainage, parks and utilities.

Most importantly, the expertise and wealth of resources of the Rockland County Department of Planning were invaluable in developing this Plan. The Department's Geographic Information Systems mapping division and the United States Census Bureau's pilot study of Rockland County as one of the first four communities selected nation-wide in the American Community Survey provided the technological tools and quantitative data that support the vision of the County's leaders and citizens. Implementation of the Plan's recommendations will rely on the County Planning Department's ongoing efforts and coordination with local governments.

C. SEQRA

The **Rockland County: River to Ridge** Plan has been identified as a Type I Action under the provisions of the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA). The Rockland County Planning Board was established as the lead agency pursuant to SEQRA regulation. According to SEQRA, a Draft Generic Environmental Impact Statement (DGEIS) is prepared as a method to evaluate Comprehensive Plan proposals. The DGEIS and the plan became the subject of a public hearing, after which a Final Generic Environmental Impact Statement is prepared, responding to all substantive comments on the draft. The Rockland County Planning Board considered these comments as part of the preparation of an Environmental Findings Statement. During this process, modifications to the Plan were made. Now that the Plan has been adopted by the Rockland County Planning Board, the County

Executive has proposed that each village and town in Rockland County adopt a resolution endorsing the Plan's policies and that the County Legislature consider adoption or acceptance of the Plan as its official land use policy guide. It is further anticipated that local comprehensive planning efforts will be guided by the County Plan to ensure appropriate consistency between municipal and County planning policies.