

# TOWN OF BETHLEHEM

## Comprehensive Plan Executive Summary

Adopted August 24, 2005

Over the last several months, the Town of Bethlehem has come together in an effort to define comprehensively a future for the community. What kind of community does Bethlehem want to be? The answer to this question helps to provide a context for the many decisions that the community will make now and in the future. It helps guide and prioritize the investments that must be made to enhance the Town's future.

This is the first comprehensive plan completed by the Town of Bethlehem. As such, many longstanding issues related to change in the community have been discussed and debated. In fact, twelve (12) public workshops, fourteen (14) Bethlehem Planning Advisory Committee meetings, and two written surveys have been conducted thus far to facilitate this discussion. This emphasis on public involvement has improved everyone's understanding of the variety of viewpoints about growth and development in the community. A full description of the public process is located in Section 2 of this document.

The Bethlehem Comprehensive Plan seeks to achieve broad consensus about the development of the town over the next ten or fifteen years. It is understood that not all individual interests can be accommodated through its recommendations. It is further understood that the plan is a living document and must be reevaluated from time to time to address changing circumstances. However, the recommendations within this comprehensive plan do indeed direct the community toward an overall vision to which the most residents of Bethlehem can agree. It has been crafted with the intent of achieving **balance** – balance between urban, suburban, and rural perspectives; balance between the need and desire for economic growth, for tax base expansion and diversification, and for the stewardship of finite land and environmental resources; and balance between the short-term and long-term health, safety, and welfare of the community.

The Town's vision for the future is captured in the following statement:

**\*In the Year 2020**, the Town of Bethlehem is a community of attractive residential neighborhoods, vibrant hamlets, successful mixed-use commercial centers, modern industrial facilities, and productive rural lands. These are well connected by regional highways and local streets, adequately serviced by public transportation, and linked by a network of sidewalks and trails. Situated at the heart of the Capital District, Bethlehem offers convenient access to all that the region has to offer. It is recognized for the excellence of its schools, the quality of its public safety and community services, the abundance of its recreational opportunities, the productivity of its local businesses, ten miles of Hudson River waterfront, and the beauty and health of its natural environment. This exceptional quality of life contributes to the economic growth and prosperity of the town and the region, assuring that the community can continue to meet the increasingly diverse needs and expectations of its residents in a fiscally sustainable manner.

\* **Note:** The Vision Statement is written as if it was the year 2020 and one was describing the Town of Bethlehem. This is how we hope to be able to describe Bethlehem in fifteen years.

The Town of Bethlehem developed a set of Guiding Principles to assist the community as it takes steps to achieve the vision articulated above. These principles are over-arching, and should be considered in all decision-making as the comprehensive plan is implemented. The Guiding Principles include: **Adaptability, Diversity, Environmental Sustainability, Fiscal Responsibility, Intermunicipal Cooperation and Community Partnerships, and Respect for Private Property.** These guiding principles are defined in Section 3 of this document.

Finally, to achieve the vision set forth by the community, multiple goals were established to guide decision-making. The goals address a variety of issues, and the recommendations in the comprehensive plan attempt to direct short-term and long-term actions toward achieving these broad goals.

The goals, in no particular order of priority, are to:

- > Achieve a balanced tax base
- > Create a business-friendly environment
- > Encourage compact, mixed-use commercial and residential development/redevelopment
- > Ensure that there is a reliable supply of high-quality water
- > Expand public, private or non-profit active and passive recreational resources and community services available in the town
- > Improve mobility – the ability of people, regardless of age and status, to engage in desired activities at moderate cost to themselves and society - throughout the town
- > Improve the development review process
- > Maintain existing public water and sewer infrastructure in developed areas of the town. Plan for fiscally responsible capital improvements to expand such infrastructure in a manner that is consistent with this plan
- > Manage and protect significant environmental systems
- > Promote commercial and industrial growth in specifically designated locations
- > Promote energy efficiency and conservation, and the use of renewable energy in the town
- > Provide opportunities for the development of a variety of housing options in the town
- > Recognize the town’s significant cultural resources, historic resources, and natural resources
- > Utilize flexible land use regulations and creative land development techniques to retain the economic value of rural land
- > Work with willing landowners to conserve quality open spaces throughout the town

More detail about the community goals listed above is available in Section 3 of this plan.

### **Plan Priorities**

The following summary organizes the plan’s principal recommendations so as to provide clear policy guidance to the Town Board and the Town’s staff related to both the level of priority and timing of

implementation for the various recommendations. More detail about the plan recommendations can be found in Section 4 of this document. The Plan Recommendations Map is located in Section 5. Additional detail about implementation of the plan is located in Section 6. In the event of any perceived ambiguity in any of the recommendations as presented throughout the plan, the construction of the plan will be guided by the intent expressed in this Executive Summary.

**Immediate Action:**

- > Update the Town's zoning and subdivision regulations to reflect the recommendations set forth in this comprehensive plan; key recommendations include the following:
  - *Hamlet Zones*: mixed use high density zones of a variety of scales and designs; encourage a variety of housing types; and mixed use buildings
  - *In-Town Residential*: high density (6 dwelling units (DU) per acre); traditional residential neighborhoods that border hamlet zones; public water and sewer; and improve pedestrian amenities
  - *Residential*: medium density (3 DU per acre); conservation design density incentive (4 DU per acre); public water and sewer required for new developments (existing developments grandfathered); and minor subdivision permitted (see definition below)
  - *Rural*: low density residential (1 DU per 2 acres); conservation design density incentive (1.25 DU per 2 acres); generally no public water and sewer; minor subdivision permitted (see definition below); specific rural mixed uses permitted as of right, others permitted but require special use permit; and with extension of water and sewer Town to consider re-zoning
  - *Riverfront Rural*: very low density residential (1 DU per 5 acres); conservation density incentive (1.5 DU per 5 acres); minor subdivisions permitted (see definition below); all rural uses permitted; and generally no public water and sewer
  - *Rural Light Industrial*: minor residential subdivision permitted (see definition below); specific light industrial uses permitted; all rural uses permitted except for major residential subdivision; generally no public water and sewer; and buffering and setbacks required when adjacent to residential district
  - *Density versus Lot Size*: provide flexibility in subdivision design by focusing more on the number of dwelling units per acre rather than minimum lot size per dwelling unit; will assist in encouraging conservation subdivision design

- *Conservation Subdivision Design:* utilize flexible lot sizes and density incentives to encourage conservation of land in subdivision design; the required open space set aside will be 50% of total site area in suburban residential zones (with public water and sewer) and 40% in rural and riverfront rural zones (no public water and sewer); and densities will be calculated against total unconstrained land. To make it easier to achieve or exceed the minimum open space set aside, and to promote housing diversity in the town, a mix of attached housing types such as well-designed duplexes and townhomes will be permitted in conservation subdivisions in addition to detached single-family homes.
- *Land Division:* allow in suburban residential, rural, riverfront rural and rural light industrial zones; permit the division of a parent parcel into not more than four lots (exclusive of the parent parcel) during any ten-year period; while there will be no minimum lot size for lots created by land division, it will not be approved without appropriate Health Department approvals for well and septic systems
- *Incentive Zoning:* include in the zoning ordinance a provision for density incentives related to open space protection (the use of conservation subdivision design) and for other negotiated public benefits (trails, utility ROW, road corridor, etc) resulting from the development; can be applied to all major zoning districts.
- *Mixed Economic Development Districts:* allow for a mix of office, light industry, and technology business as primary uses and high-density residential and neighborhood commercial as secondary uses; specific areas include the area to the west of the Slingerlands By-Pass Extension, the east side of 9W from Wemple Rd. to Glenmont Rd., the area near the intersection of Wemple Road and Rt. 9W, and, the lands on the west side of Rt. 144 between Clapper and Wemple Roads
- *Develop zoning to protect stream corridors, wetlands, steep slopes and flood plains:* consistent with existing federal and state regulations, generally accepted engineering and design practices, and the town's current review practices; formally define characteristics of lands constrained for development due to steep slopes, stream corridors, wetlands and other natural constraints; this will form the basis for a site's developable (unconstrained) land area
- *Design Standards:* as a deliverable of the comprehensive plan, design standards will be established for two zoning districts: hamlets and commercial. The Planning Board will be responsible for design review in these districts as part of special use permit and/or site plan review. An additional board (additional layer of review) is not contemplated. In the future design guidelines/standards should be considered for other districts, particularly where mixed uses are allowed.

**Priority Actions / Tier 1 Recommendations:** These are the primary recommendations of the comprehensive plan for which there is broad consensus and an accompanying near term implementation action item.

- > Conduct a Linkage Study for the Route 9W Corridor that includes a feasibility analysis of possible “northern alignment” option for the Selkirk Bypass: The Town has applied for funding to conduct a Rt. 9W Linkage Study to assess needs and develop preferred alternatives for both transportation improvements and land uses in the 9W corridor. If the funding is achieved, the study should be conducted during 2005-2006. The Rt. 9W Linkage Study could result in refined land use recommendations for this important corridor. At the Town Board’s discretion the study may be treated as a comprehensive plan amendment, and it could lead to further zoning amendments impacting lands in the corridor. As a follow-up to the Linkage Study, the Town should consider preparing a Selkirk Hamlet Master Plan once the Selkirk By-Pass location is resolved.
- > Create an Official Map: In accordance with Town Law §270, the Town should develop an Official Map that shows the location of existing and proposed streets and other public facilities. This initiative should track with the Rt. 9W Linkage Study.
- > Develop a Local Waterfront Revitalization Plan (LWRP): The Town has applied for funding from the New York State Department of State to assist in the development of an LWRP for the riverfront area. The LWRP will provide more clarity about future growth and land use preferences in the riverfront area. The LWRP could also result in refined land use recommendations. At the Town Board’s discretion the study may be treated as a comprehensive plan amendment, and it could lead to further zoning amendments impacting lands in the riverfront area.
- > Actively coordinate development of the proposed Vista Technology Park in Slingerlands with planning and development of the proposed New Scotland Road Hamlet: To assist in expanding and diversifying the Town’s tax base, implement Slingerlands By-Pass Extension and development of the VTC. The Town should work with a focus group of stakeholders to develop a build-out concept for the remaining developable lands especially along New Scotland Road.
- > Establish a Citizens Advisory Committee on Conservation (CACC): The Town Board should appoint an advisory committee to explore conservation projects, and opportunities with willing landowners, as identified by the Town Board. In considering appointments to the CACC, the Town Board should identify appointees that are broadly representative of the various neighborhoods and hamlets of the Town so as to ensure a broad cross-section of community viewpoints. The CACC may provide advisory information to the Town Board as

requested, but will not have independent regulatory powers. An immediate opportunity has emerged for the CACC to assist in the development of an integrated network of trails and pedestrian facilities in the Slingerlands area. In addition, the CACC can assist with longer-term activities at the Town Board's request such as exploring funding opportunities for open space protection programs, working to develop a Farmland and Open Space Protection Program, and developing an inventory of open space and farmland resources.

- > Establish a Comprehensive Plan Oversight Committee: This committee would assist the Town Board and help guide the plan implementation effort.
- > Update Planning Department and Building Department Information Systems: Current information about the Town's growth helps to form the basis for good decision-making. Bethlehem is a growing community and it is important to track information about this growth. A system should be established to digitally record the progress of development projects from the approval process through to completion. The data included in this system could later be linked to the Town's geography through the development of a Geographic Information System (GIS). The Town's zoning map could also be updated in a digital manner. A Town GIS would also be used to efficiently manage the Town's facilities and infrastructure.
- > Develop a "Citizen's Guide to Town of Bethlehem Land Use and Development Regulations:" This brochure, developed by Town staff, would assist not only staff, but also board members, residents and developers in understanding the Town's zoning and subdivision regulations. This document would make the development process more clear for developers, Town officials and staff. As follow-up to the publication of this brochure, the Town could coordinate with the Chamber of Commerce and the Industrial Development Agency to reach out to the development community in an effort to further clarify the development process.
- > Identify locations for infill development and redevelopment activities and encourage the use of such locations: As an alternative to greenfield development, the Town should assist and encourage redevelopment of existing vacant and underutilized sites like the Glenmont (Ames) Plaza in Glenmont, the former Blue Cross building in Slingerlands, and the former Daiseytek building on West Yard Road near Feura Bush.

**Mid-Term Actions / Tier II Recommendations:** (these recommendations relate to important community topics that have emerged through the planning process but for which more focused consideration and consensus building is required for future Town Board implementation; these recommendations are of a more long term nature)

- > Consider development of hamlet master plans for specific hamlets

- > Consider adopting local right to farm and right to practice forestry laws and encourage participation in Agricultural Districts
- > Revive efforts to create a business improvement district demonstration project along Delaware Avenue
- > Conduct a Delaware Avenue Linkage Study
- > Consider reducing street width in new residential developments
- > Consider developing of a Town recreational trail system and identify potential funding mechanisms
- > Consider a Town-wide referendum to create funding for land acquisition and preservation of open space and parkland
- > Consider developing an inventory of farmland, open space, recreational uses and natural resources
- > Consider creating a farm and open space protection program including the purchase of development rights and the use of conservation easements
- > Conduct a Town-wide inventory of historic and cultural resources
- > Consider development of a community center to provide community, youth, and senior programs and activities

**Ongoing Actions / Tier III Recommendations:** (these are recommendations that relate to Town administration, programming and ordinary operations)

- > Maintain and enhance pedestrian connections within and between neighborhoods, recreation facilities, and hamlet centers
- > Prepare for and comply with the new Phase II Stormwater Management Regulations
- > Promote the use of alternative, renewable energy sources for public and private buildings
- > Coordinate with fire and emergency services providers regarding long term growth needs and facilities planning
- > Encourage the use of Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standards for both new and redeveloped buildings in town
- > Assist developers in understanding and identifying available funding opportunities supportive of sustainable design and construction
- > Provide educational services related to septic system maintenance and the prevention of illicit discharges into the Town's storm drainage system
- > Initiate a "buy local" program and develop an agricultural economic strategy
- > Provide adequate bicycle facilities and establish signed system of routes throughout the Town
- > Coordinate with the Bethlehem Chamber to promote local business and employment
- > Establish a Park Master Plan coordinated with community growth projections
- > Coordinate with school districts, neighboring communities, and other community and regional organizations
- > Enhance entranceways and community gateways

- > Investigate the current condition of and improve as necessary, the technology infrastructure available in Bethlehem
- > Encourage continuing education for members of the Planning Board and Zoning Board of Appeals

**Long-Term Action:**

- > Review this comprehensive plan within five to ten years: As the community changes and grows, its needs and desires change. The comprehensive plan should be a flexible and adaptable document that reflects such changes. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that the Town of Bethlehem review and update, if necessary, the comprehensive plan. An assessment of the progress achieved on the implementation actions would also be beneficial.