

WARREN COUNTY 2040

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Warren County is developing a plan that will set goals and objectives for the County for the next 20 years.

WARREN COUNTY
New York

PARTNER INTERVIEW SUMMARY

OVERVIEW

As part of the Warren County 2040 public engagement, LaBella Associates collaborated with the Working Group and Public Advisory Group to identify important partners that either regularly coordinate services with the County, fund or regulate key County activities, or provide essential services to County residents.

It is noted that there are many more partners and stakeholders that play an important role in supporting the County and its residents' quality of life – non-profits, health care providers, individual businesses. As the Comprehensive Plan process advances, additional organizations that are active within the Plan's focus areas will continue to be identified, and additional interviews and/or focus groups will be organized to capture more insight and feedback from those key organizations.

The initial Partners that were interviewed for Warren County 2040 are:

- Adirondack Glens Falls Transportation Council
- Adirondack Park Agency
- Adirondack Regional Chamber of Commerce
- Capital Region Economic Development Council
- CDTA
- Lake Champlain Lake George Regional Planning Board
- Lake George Association
- Lake George Association/Waterkeeper
- Lake George Land Conservancy
- Lake George Park Commission
- Northern Forest Center



- Saratoga, Warren, & Washington County Workforce Development Board
- Northern Border Regional Commission
- Warren County Economic Development Corporation
- Warren Washington Industrial Development Agency
- Warren County Cornell Cooperative Extension
- Warren County Department of Workforce Development
- Warren County Soil and Water Conservation District

FINDINGS AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

In order to align with the overall plan structure, the findings and key takeaways that follow are grouped into the plan focus areas: **Our built environment, Our natural environment, Our economy, How we collaborate, How we operate, and Quality of Life.** The focus area “How we operate” is an internal focus area and is addressed through the Plan’s departmental interviews and related analysis.

OUR BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Locational Advantages

Many partners commented about how ideally located Warren County is – “offering something for everyone.” Since I-87 bisects the County, no area of the County is too far from services and amenities. One interviewee referred to that dynamic as a “belt of prosperity.” The County is also a reasonable commute to many major employment centers – whether those are government positions in Albany or tech sector positions in Saratoga County – and the Albany International Airport for business or leisure air travel.

Housing

Housing is a key topic that is a priority throughout the County. Some partners shared the perspective that housing supply, more than affordability, is the biggest issue, while acknowledging that increases in demand will push prices up if supply does not increase. Other partners felt that affordability was already an issue, at least in certain communities. They shared that they have had difficulty attracting staff because of housing prices and several staff members must commute considerable distances to find affordable housing. In terms of solutions, several interviewees noted the need for zoning updates that would allow for more dense, multi-family housing and the creative, adaptive reuse of existing building stock. Within the blue line, it was noted that, while there are more restrictions to development, most communities aren’t maximizing their development potential within the Hamlet and Moderate Intensity zones. However, several interviewees noted the additional challenges of community push back against housing projects, which creates additional delays and can deter developers. Finally, it was acknowledged that while the County and several partners touch aspects of housing development, there isn’t a single entity whose primary focus is to advance housing solutions in Warren County and several tools that other counties are using to spur housing development - land banks, land trusts, etc. – do not exist within Warren County.

Cell and High-Speed Internet

Cellular and high-speed internet infrastructure is an issue that continues to be on a lot of

partners' minds. Partners saw that infrastructure as essential to "up-County" communities, to allow for remote work opportunities, telemedicine, and other online based functions that have become essential features of modern living. The Development Authority of the North Country (DANC) -operated telecommunications network was mentioned as an example of an approach that could help close key gaps in Warren County that aren't financially viable for private businesses to fill.

Transportation

Struggles related to transportation access were a point of conversation in several interviews. Noted challenges included the dispersed population/rural nature of much of the County and the lack of information or capacity to administer Federally funded transportation projects. It was suggested that the County could play a greater role in bridging that gap, potentially through increased input and involvement of County DPW for project management in the County's smaller communities. However, when compared to other areas within NYSDOT Region 1, it can be hard for Warren County to make a compelling grant funding case and to advocate for congestion and infrastructure improvements.

Despite these challenges, most interviewees were optimistic, particularly with the CDTA merger with GGFT. Several interviewees noted the Day 1 benefits of the larger organization's resources and technology upgrades and opportunities to work with the CDTA on future service expansions. In conversations with CDTA, they noted that there are no planned service expansions at the moment, with the focus instead on creating connections and becoming imbedded in the community to first better understand needs. CDTA did share that they think there is a lot more potential for the trolleys that provide transportation to Lake George and Bolton in the summer months. Also, while every community they serve has different demographics that affect the feasibility of different transportation services, the CDTA team did point to Montgomery and Saratoga Counties as natural comparison counties because of the similar urban and rural make-up of the counties. The CDTA team also emphasized the growth of their Universal Access program, which provides free access to qualifying riders throughout the entire CDTA network and has grown to account for 25% to 30% of all ridership. They are eager to meet with potential sponsors, explain the benefits to sponsors and riders, and see the program grow with their services in the greater Glens Falls transit area.

OUR NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Diversity of Natural Resources and Recreational Opportunities

Almost every interviewed Partner identified Warren County's natural resources and recreational opportunities as one of its greatest resources. To interviewees, it is the overall quality and quantity of resources that the County boasts and the ease of access to those resources that differentiates Warren County even among other counties in the Adirondacks. Within any category of outdoor recreational opportunity, residents and visitors have several options that are appropriate for all ability levels. Downhill skiers, as one example, can choose from among Hickory Mountain, West Mountain, and Gore Mountain – each mountain offering different terrain, amenities, and experiences, all within an hour's drive from one another. This is true of almost every category. Whether mountain biking, kayaking, boating, Warren County offers something for everyone and has invested in infrastructure and amenities to make those resources accessible.

Lake George

While the diversity of natural resources and recreational opportunities is one of the County's greatest strengths, several partners also noted that Lake George stands out from these other resources and provides unique benefits and opportunities to the County. As a truly world-renowned water resource and vacation destination, Lake George anchors the County's tourism and recreation economy. These provide direct benefits to the communities with frontage on the lake – in the form of businesses, festivals, and other Lake inspired economic activity – and direct benefits throughout the County in the form of occupancy taxes. Interviewees also pointed out that while Lake George might be the reason that many visitors initially visit Warren County, it allows Warren County to then expose visitors to other opportunities within the County to broaden the positive impact that Lake George has for the whole County.

Climate Change and Environmental Threats

Many interviewees mentioned the challenges and risks that climate change poses to Warren County's natural resources and infrastructure. Whether it is the emergence of harmful algal blooms in the County's water bodies, invasive species, road salt usage, or the general stress that warming temperatures and extreme weather are placing on the natural and built environment. Despite these challenges, most respondents are encouraged by the County's response to these threats, so far, and are optimistic about its ability to continue to mitigate and manage environmental threats. Here again, Lake George plays an outsized role in the County's ability to successfully respond to climate change and its impacts. The research and resource management invested in the Lake's protection leads to best practices that are then implemented to protect other natural resources within the County. The County and municipalities have also made progress and shown leadership in road salt reduction, making investments in brine making equipment and implementation, as well as septic system inspections and repairs. The establishment of a brining Co-Op that can extend brining practices to private properties was mentioned as a particularly exciting opportunity for making progress.

Climate Haven

No region, county or community is immune from the effects of climate change, but studies have shown that Upstate New York, the mid-west, and portions of the Great Plains will be less impacted because of their climates, the distance from the coast, and the moderating effect that the Great Lakes have on warming temperatures. Upstate New York is also at less risk from all five types of natural disasters – hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, forest fires, and earthquakes - and has abundant fresh drinking water. As extreme weather increases and its impacts worsen, climate refugees are going to have to relocate somewhere, and they will be highly motivated to relocate to an area where they will avoid the threats and conditions that they are fleeing in the first place. Not every partner made this connection, but several identified this as a key story to tell visitors and people that are considering relocating to the region.

OUR ECONOMY

Workforce Development

Workforce development initiatives in the County were generally thought to be going well. Some of that has been helped by temporary funding, including ARPA funds. While staffing

and programming is in good shape now, agencies that are coordinating workforce development services have concerns about what will happen when temporary funding sunsets. Interviewees felt that all entities within the workforce development continuum – K-12 schools, BOCES, community colleges, workforce development boards – really need to be future focused and attuned to the types of skills and knowledge that are going to be durable and resilient in the future economy. Genessee County was pointed to as a model example of aligning education with current and future job skills. Increasing internship and apprenticeship programs was mentioned as a major opportunity, as well. It was noted that interns and apprentices form relationships with employers that are close to their schools and then end up living in that area when programs lead to jobs. Developing those relationships in Warren County can help attract residents and add skilled employees to the workforce.

Manufacturing Jobs

Several of the Partner interviews centered around current major manufacturing job sectors in the County and any risks to these current sectors or opportunities to diversify. Several interviewees cited the recent closure of a major manufacturing business in Glens Falls and another just across the border in Saratoga County. One interviewee also cited concerns around some of the other major employers in the medical device and paper industries, stressed the need to be proactive in nurturing a more diverse manufacturing base, and suggested exploring ancillary businesses that support the tourism industry.

Employees/Recruitment

The disconnect between the number of open positions and the number of working adults was cited in multiple Partner interviews. To address this disconnect, several interviewees noted the need to think outside of the box, including hiring older adults and eliminating stigmas around hiring the formerly incarcerated and immigrants. Highlighting local job opportunities to youth was also noted as critical, to ensure that they understand that they can return to (or stay in) Warren County and make a decent living. With all these opportunities, though, interviewees noted the challenges around finding additional housing for the workforce.

Proximity to Major Employers

While there are obvious incentives to attract and retain employers of all sizes within its borders, there are certain geographical and logistical realities that make locating major operations "north of Exit 14" (i.e., north of Saratoga Springs) more challenging, at least in the opinion of one interviewee. Several interviewees pointed out that Warren County, especially the southern communities in Warren County, are not too far to commute to employment centers in Saratoga and Albany Counties. The merger with CDTA and improved commuting options should be a focus to encourage more people that currently live and work outside of Warren County to live in Warren County. The availability of transit should also be better promoted and specifically businesses should have an understanding of and promote their location relative to CDTA routes, as applicable.

Small Business and Remote Work

Warren County has a strong base of small businesses and continues to attract small business start-ups. The County also has partners in ARCC, LCLGRP, and Warren County EDC that are providing important supports to small businesses and fostering an entrepreneurial culture in the County and region. As remote and hybrid work continues to

become more engrained in work environments, Warren County can capitalize on its other assets to attract remote workers. One interviewee observed that, in many ways, Warren County's geography and culture lends itself better to attracting 1,000 small business and remote based employees than one, 1,000-employee business.

Taxes

Occupancy taxes, while sometimes the source of disagreement and tension among Warren County municipalities, were also seen as an equalizing force within the County and primary means by which all of Warren County benefits from Lake George and other core community assets. A few interviewees pointed out that many of the "mom and pop" hotels and bed and breakfasts are not being passed down to the next generation and, to the extent that they are converted to private residences, occupancy taxes will decrease and the distribution of property taxes will become more concentrated in the more populous municipalities within the County. Another tax related issue is local property tax assessments and equalization rates. One interviewee felt that many communities are leaving money on the table that could be invested into community priorities.

HOW WE COLLABORATE

Collaboration with Warren County

For the most part, most interviewees described their collaborations with Warren County – either County staff, committees, or interactions with Supervisors – as positive. They find staff to be competent, respectful, and responsive. Where there are overlapping or shared services, interviewees feel that those efforts are smooth and streamlined in most situations and, when questions or uncertainty arise, they feel that there is a good dialogue to identify the best approach and to delineate roles and responsibilities. In a few cases, partner organizations indicated that they have capacity to be utilized more or wished that they were brought in on decision-making processes earlier, so that they can help save the County's time and resources and help arrive at solutions sooner. Partner organizations' interface and communication with the County range in frequency and formality. Some interactions are informal and "as needed"; some are informal, but regular meetings or operational touch points; and some are formal, include committee membership, or regular attendance and reporting at committee meetings. Most partners felt that their current styles and levels of communication with the County were sufficient for aligning services and achieving mutual goals. A few Partner organizations, however, felt that slightly more regular meetings would improve collaborations. Finally, several interviewees cited the Supervisors' level of engagement and passion for the County as one of the County's greatest strengths.

Politicization and Polarization

While many Partner organizations identified Supervisors' level of engagement and passion for the County as one of the County's greatest strengths, several – in many instances the same people – also see it as one of the County's greatest challenges. Several interviewees noted an increase in politicization and polarization that has entered the County dynamic. Some interviewees felt that this has created too much focus on the differences between the communities, rather than the unifying strengths and resources that could make the County a stronger, better place to live. Interviewees also noted a reluctance amongst some to trying new approaches and that the County could play a bigger role in solving the County's issues.

Interagency Collaboration

In addition to exploring how partner organizations collaborate with Warren County, interview questions also asked partner organizations to reflect on their collaborations with other agencies that are providing similar services to Warren County residents. In the realm of workforce and economic development, partners felt like efforts are mostly aligned, but did question whether some services were redundant or whether the right combination of agencies or structures are in place to best serve the County's economic interests. It was noted that in any other regions and communities, a single economic development agency will often have a broader mandate and consolidate more services and tools under one roof – the Development Authority of the North Country and Schenectady Metroplex Development Authority are two example agencies that came up in conversation. That being said, four of the primary economic development agencies serving Warren County – LCLGRP, IDA, EDC, and ARCC – have begun meeting monthly to discuss shared interests and to coordinate efforts.

In the realm of natural resource management and protection, partners similarly felt that they had the right tools to address issues and seize on opportunities and that the tools were being used well. There are opportunities to better align efforts to go for bigger, regional grants and presenting a united front to state funding agencies.

QUALITY OF LIFE

Community Spirit

The people of Warren County have great community spirit, good work ethics, and are dedicated to making Warren County a better place to live. They have an appreciation for the history of their communities and the region.

Urban/Rural Balance

Several interviewees pointed to the balance between urban amenities and cultural experiences found in Glens Falls, Queensbury, and, to a lesser degree, the County's villages and hamlets, with the rural, secluded, outdoor lifestyle that Warren County has to offer. County residents can choose to have either as their primary experience, but have easy access to that complementary lifestyle. One interviewee also pointed to the arts scene that has emerged in Glens Falls as a trend that could be extended to more rural communities, to bring residents, visitors, and creative energy to those communities.

Critical Community Services

Several interviews acknowledged Warren County's community services – especially its health care services – as differentiators to other rural and Adirondack communities. This continuum of care will be important to caring for the County's aging population and for attracting new residents, especially retirees and families, to the County. Warren County's K-12 schools were also seen as a strength. A few interviewees encouraged the County to continue to look for ways to support programming for the differently abled population, especially seeking partnerships and programming with Warren County employers to increase their participation in the workforce. As is the case in most areas of the U.S., childcare came up as a challenge in many conversations with interviewees. Partners expressed concerns about the costs that it adds to families' household expenses when it is available and the number of people that it is keeping out of the workforce when it is not available or affordable. Several Partners are directly or indirectly supporting solutions, some

through research, funding identification, and regional coordination, others through direct partnerships with the Southern Adirondack Child Care Network.

Aging Population

There was no avoiding Warren County's aging population. The most common concern associated with the County's aging population among interviewees was labor force participation. With so many employees set to age out of the work force in the next five to 15 years, many partners expressed concerns about filling those positions and the amount of institutional knowledge and skills that employers will be losing through those transitions. Other partners echoed concerns that were voiced by County employees, noting the social service and health care costs associated with an aging population, the lack of suitable senior housing, and the loss of volunteers that are currently supporting critical community services.

Negative Social Trends

Along with the County's aging population, several interviewees expressed concerns about negative social trends, including disengaged youth, juvenile delinquency, addiction, and mental health. One interviewee was especially concerned about youth in Warren County in light of the isolation and dislocation they have experienced in recent years – noting "if we don't invest in young people, now, we will pay for it later" and the importance of providing young people more reasons to stay to reverse the aging trend.

Growth and Change

One of the most fundamental questions that was posed during a Partner interview was, "What kind of future are we trying to provide a chance for?" Each community within Warren County will answer that question differently, which means that the County will need to understand what each community's vision and goals are to know how to best support that community vision. Not every community wants to grow or, at least, does not want to make certain trade-offs to grow. From a big picture standpoint, creating housing, jobs, and quality of life offerings that bring new people and younger people to Warren County will be essential to slowing or reversing the aging trend, to keeping the County vital, and to keeping some communities in the County viable, but every community will decide how much growth they want and how much change they are willing to embrace to reach that growth. The County can support communities to ensure that they are able to reach those baselines and remain viable.