

Chapter 1

Introduction

Background

In 2003, at the request of Edward A. Diana, County Executive, the Orange County Department of Planning began preparation of the first Orange County Open Space Plan. Completion of this Plan was recommended in the newly adopted Orange County Comprehensive Plan (April 2003), and is presented here as a formal supplement to the County Comprehensive Plan.

Given Orange County's current and projected population growth and the related demand for services, this Plan is designed to:

- Define the uniqueness and environmental characteristics of the County as they relate to quality of life (see Map 1),
- Define future open space needs, and
- Recommend County and other priority actions needed to protect key open spaces.

Additionally, the Open Space Plan supports and is supplemented by the three existing documents:

- 2000 Orange County Park Master Plan
- 2002 Orange County Water Quality Strategy
- 2004 Orange County Agricultural Economic Development Strategy

This Open Space Plan also addresses some key “areas of concern” identified in the 2003 Comprehensive Plan. These areas of concern include:

- Better management of development patterns - providing guarantees that land development location and design is consistent with open space needs and,
- The future of agriculture – supporting farmland protection efforts that complement lead efforts to support the economic, business vitality of agriculture.

The Planning Department was assisted by a number of individuals and organizations in the preparation of the Orange County Open Space Plan. Notable was the Orange County Land Trust, which, along with a technical committee of professional and volunteer land and open space experts, provided regular input. Draft elements of this Plan related to agriculture were prepared by ACDS, LLD of Columbia, Maryland with assistance from the American Farmland Trust, Northeast Regional Office. As components of the Orange County Agricultural Economic Development Strategy, these elements were reviewed and accepted by the Orange County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board and the Orange County Legislature. Finally, preliminary ideas and all draft materials were reviewed and accepted by the Orange County

Planning Board prior to referral for adoption to the County Executive and County Legislature.

The County Open Space Plan is a five-year plan, keyed to the five-year horizon of the County Comprehensive Plan. Recommendations in the Open Space Plan include early action items (to be implemented in one year) and longer-term, five-year actions. Recommendations also include low-cost actions as well as actions requiring a commitment of financial and/or staff resources.

Open Space Plan Categories

The major resource areas for consideration are **Water Resources, Agriculture, Recreation, Landforms and Landscapes, and Biological Diversity (Biodiversity)**.

Water Resources: Water resources include the surface waters and its water shed areas, protection zones around the well heads for subsurface water, wetland areas and buffer zones, 100 year flood plain areas, vernal pools, streams, rivers and lakes. The area mentioned can encompass large tracts of land and can be protected through a variety of protection measures that limit land use but do not forbid all uses.

Agriculture: Agriculture remains an important feature of the County's economy and landscape. Agricultural activity occurs primarily in the Wallkill River Valley but is also common in other areas. Approximately 20,000 acres of generally unbuildable "black dirt", of which 14,000 is farmed, is located in the Towns of Goshen, Warwick, Wawayanda, Minisink and a small part of Chester. Efforts are presently under way to protect some upland farmland but larger efforts will be necessary to keep ahead of the growing development pressures.

Recreation: Recreation includes lands varying by types and sizes. Local parks and urban open spaces include a range of large parks with natural areas, playing fields, playgrounds, and small "passive" parks with trees and benches. Within these open spaces, there may be community gardens, and paths for walking and biking through woodland and along streambeds.

Significant Landforms and landscapes: Significant landforms and landscapes are natural features that were formed through dramatic changes in the earth's surface. The features may include palisades, steep inclines, rock out-cropping, prominent mountaintops and valley vistas. Some of these features may include agricultural areas where land has been cleared for farming or man-made buildings were constructed to create picturesque landscapes. Other areas may be connected with historical events such as military battlefields or industrial activities.

Biodiversity: Biodiversity is a shortened version of the term "biological diversity". The concept encompasses the complex community of individual species and their habitats, acknowledging the variability within and among the species. Orange County contains unique features and circumstances that produce exceptional biodiversity. These

include its geology, an ecological crossroads, low-density development and active agricultural uses.

Why a Plan?

Planning for the protection of open space is a community-wide effort. It is not just an acquisition plan, but a wide range of recommendations and techniques for protecting open space.

An open space plan can:

- identify and recommend new recreational facilities and water related public access points that may help the economic and social well being of the County.
- identify such natural resources as wetlands, stream corridors and other ecologically important features.
- identify and recommend trail linkages that will provide corridor connections between public parks and protected natural areas.

The open space plan identifies the priority areas that are important for protection and recognizes the areas that are more desirable for economic development proposals. It will also identify land use techniques that will protect and provide open areas within new developments.

Through the plan, residents of the County have an opportunity to protect important resources for future generations to enjoy and benefit. Open space is a service. Although there may be controversy surrounding the idea of protecting open space, the planning process establishes a way whereby people can discuss and recognize important resources and develop priorities that will benefit the whole community.

Benefits of Open Space

Open space provides many benefits to Orange County. There are direct and indirect benefits as well as short term and long-term benefits. The natural environment not only provides resources to provide food products but also items for medicine and goods that we use on a daily basis. Residents benefit greatly from the social, environmental and economic products of having open space within individual communities and the County as a whole. For this reason, open space should be considered a service just like transportation infrastructure or education.

Social Benefits

Orange County developed historically as an agriculture community with clusters of settlement on the rivers and near major intersecting highways. This pattern of development remained until the introduction of the automobile in the early 1900's. The

attraction of beautiful tree covered mountains, clean fishing streams and open pastureland brought people from the New York Metropolitan Area to vacation and ultimately to live permanently. Better transportation systems also made it easier for people to commute to jobs far from their place of residence.

More and more people have left the nearby urban communities to experience the tranquility and comforts of living in a more rural environment. The diversity of recreational opportunities within the County and the nearby Catskill and Pocono Mountains has contributed to interest in living near these natural vacationlands. These new residents have demanded local recreation opportunities. This has helped to protect open space for parks, trails, water access and general passive types of recreational opportunities.

Orange County has produced diverse agricultural goods such as dairy, vegetable, fruit and forest products for many decades. Even though the industry has declined, demands for these products continue to grow. Residents are still able to enjoy the opportunity to purchase fresh farm products from local farmers. Agriculture contributes to the quality of life in the County, underscoring the need to protect critical remaining farmland and invest in agricultural economic development.

Orange County is filled with natural and historic landmarks that provide a common heritage for residents. They provide a sense of pride that binds us together on common issues and provide a historic basis for future decision-making.

The many recreational opportunities, whether passive or active, provide great opportunities for family and group outings and camaraderie. The remaining forests and fields, a few beach areas, wetlands, historic sites and natural areas provide unique, educational opportunities for all ages and cultural backgrounds.

The importance of parks for active and passive recreational opportunities is enormous. The County Parks Plan identifies capital improvements necessary to maintain existing County Parks and recognizes the importance of protecting future lands that will become passive and/or active County Parks. This Plan will re-emphasize the importance of expanding and protecting the existing parks and also encourage new locations of future areas to fulfill the needs of a growing population.

Residents in urban neighborhoods seek out recreation and open space opportunities close to their homes. It is important that future open space and park considerations consider the needs of urban areas. An awareness of opportunities to set aside land along streams or within neighborhoods is essential to provide places for children to play and participate in athletic activities. Trails and open spaces offer not only opportunities for recreation but also the chance for adults and children to work together to create activities that maintain the park and open space areas.

Environmental Benefits

Healthy natural systems play an important part in protecting and maintaining the environmental quality of communities. Diverse ecological communities are an important part of the overall landscape that gives the community its character as well as the quality of life that attracts people to make their homes and businesses in Orange County.

Environmental benefits of open space include:

- Forested areas contribute to minimizing the creation of global warming by removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.
- Freshwater wetlands and tidal wetlands provide a filtering system that treats polluted water, buffer developed areas from flooding, aquifer recharge, stream base flow maintenance and recreational opportunities.
- Trees and parks, especially in urban settings, can reduce noise, lower temperatures in the summer, reduce the need for cooling and heating buildings, and trap pollutants from the atmosphere.
- Forests are vital to the transfer of rainwater to ground water through root systems, which help to maintain and improve the clarity of the groundwater.
- Biological resources and natural habitats add value to the quality of life for all living things. Open spaces provide un-fragmented areas large enough to maintain habitats and roaming areas for larger wildlife. With these larger areas the plant and animal communities can maintain healthy growth and reproduction patterns. The natural environment draws millions of people to Orange County to either live or recreate.
- Our educational institutions have used the open space areas within the County for education for children and adults. Natural areas are living museums that provide interpretive walks and vibrant classrooms within which to describe the importance of the natural environment and the positive impact it has on our lives.

Economic Benefits

Protecting open space provides a variety of significant benefits to Orange County. Some of the major benefits include tourism, farmland, timber harvesting and recreation opportunities. Development design that complements open space can also result in less costly environmental protection and mitigation, more efficient infrastructure and capital investment, and increased real estate values where neighborhoods and communities are close to open spaces.

Tourism is an important industry to Orange County and to New York State. Parks, lake beaches, pools, scenic views, streams, historic sites and river recreation attract millions of out of town and state visitors who spend large amounts of money for services and products provided by local area businesses. The effects of trickling down provide jobs and income for support service providers. Visitors to Orange County generate almost \$210 million in sales to local areas, and another \$8.4 million is generated through tax revenues.

Agriculture in the County is still an important economic industry that provides jobs and income to the economy. The recent Orange County Agricultural Economic Development Strategy (summarized in Chapter III) outlines the importance of farmland to the County and establishes a series of recommendations to continue the industry for generations to come. A section is set-aside in the Plan that explains the benefits and the importance of the County's farming industry.

Although timber harvesting is a minor industry in Orange County, small lumbering companies harvest much of the hardwood found in the larger forested areas in the County. Several property owners participate in the New York State Forest Tax Law that requires owners to develop a management plan for logging at designated growth levels. The map entitled "Protected Open Space" in Chapter III identifies the parcels that are presently receiving property tax reductions.

The County's economic development community markets Orange County by highlighting its natural amenities as incentives for marketing large scale commercial and office facilities. They realize that these amenities are important in attracting not only the workers for these businesses but also the company executives as well.

Through numerous studies completed in New York State and other states, open space protection demonstrates that money at the municipal level can be saved or reduced. Land use design techniques such as clustering can reduce the costs of infrastructure costs such as utilities, transportation and public works. Studies that were completed in other areas of the country demonstrate that infrastructure costs in the local community were less due to clustering housing and protecting the remaining open space. In New Jersey a study found that communities in the study were able to save \$1.3 billion in infrastructure costs over a 20-year period. In South Carolina \$2.7 billion could be saved over a 20-year period. Another study in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area demonstrated that clustering units within a more dense zoning area could slash \$3 billion in capital infrastructure costs over a 20-year period.

Recent studies demonstrate that land (that remains in forest production and farmland production) produces revenue to the local municipality yet reduces the need for additional services. Homes that are located near or adjacent to open space lands are valued higher due to the amenities of adjacent non-development. Studies also demonstrate that new residential development in previously undeveloped land can result in a net loss of tax revenues to the municipality. New services such as schools, police, fire protection, roads, solid waste, sewage treatment and municipal offices can outweigh the increased tax revenues.

A recent Trust for Public Land publication, titled "The Economic Benefits of Parks and Open Space" and published in 1999, identified the following as examples of increased home value near protected open space. "In Salem, Oregon, land adjacent to a greenbelt was assessed at \$1,200 more than only 1,000 feet away. A three mile greenbelt in Oakland, California near the city center added \$44 million to surrounding property values, in Denver, Colorado a survey showed that resident's desire to live near a greenbelt rose from 16% to 48% and in Dayton, Ohio the increased selling price of

Orange County Open Space Plan, June, 2004

homes near the Cox Arboretum and park were influenced by the close proximity to the park facility."

Targeting development where services are provided and protecting vital open space will improve the economy and quality of life in the community. Even reuse of previously developed land such as vacant lots or brownfields will help produce additional tax revenues.

Existing Plans to Protect Open Space

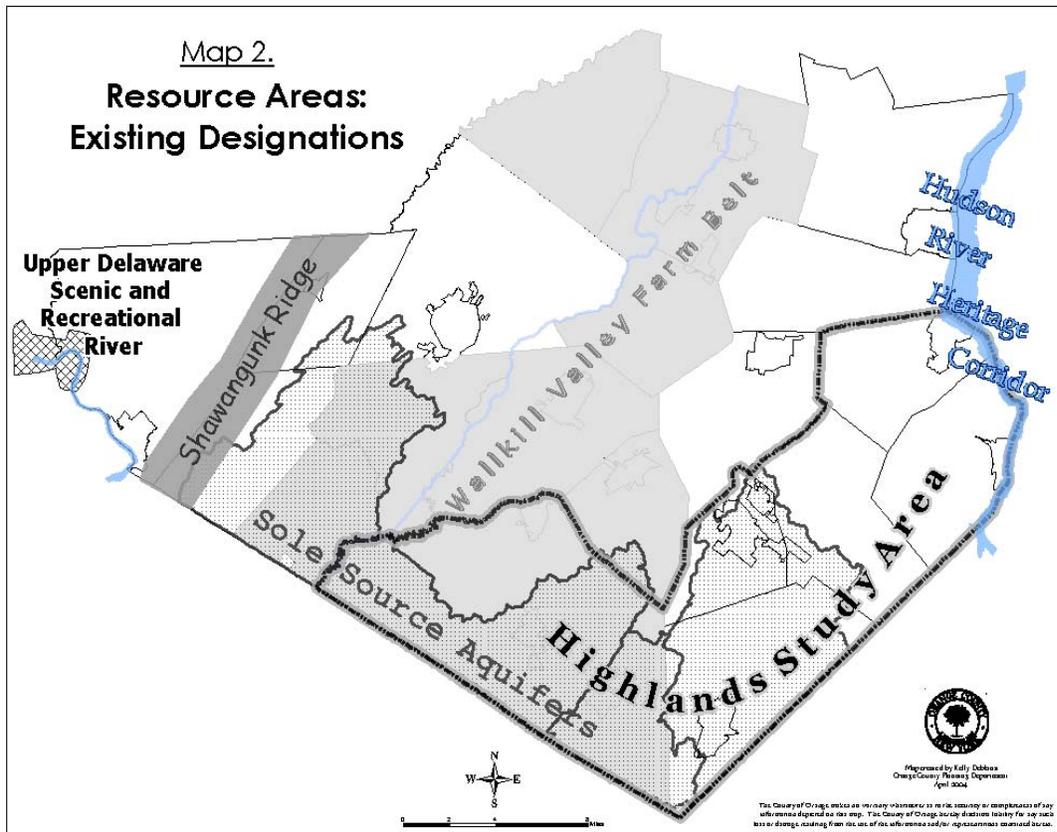
New York State's Open Space Conservation Plan 2002

In 1992 New York State established its first Open Space Plan beginning a long-term effort to protect open space. Every two years with the support of regional committees, the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) have updated the Plan to add new policies and new sites to the long list of proposed protection resources.

The missions of the two agencies are similar. DEC is directed "to conserve, improve and protect the State's natural resources and environment and control water, land air pollution, in order to enhance the health, safety and welfare of the people of the state and their overall economic and social well-being." OPRHP's mission is "to provide safe and enjoyable recreational and interpretive opportunities for all New York State residents and visitors and to be responsible stewards of our valuable natural, historic and cultural resources."

The plan includes several chapters that discuss the benefits of open space, the inventories of resources, recommendations, and the framework for protecting open space for future generations. The New York State Open Space Section 3 Committee that includes Orange County has identified the resources to be protected in a series of resource corridors. Areas that specifically apply to the County are Mongaup Valley Wildlife Management Area, Schunemunk Mountain/Woodcock Mountain /Moodna Creek, Shawangunk Mountains, Sterling Forest surrounding area, Hudson /Wallkill Valley Farmlands, Hudson Valley Estuary/Greenway Trail, Long Path, New York Highlands, Wallkill River Valley.

As money becomes available through the Environmental Protection Funds to purchase properties, other properties identified in the plan are moved to priority positions for acquisition. The State has made a commitment to protect one million acres of open space over the decade. The State Plan will continue its effort through constant updating to fulfill the demands identified.



The New York State Quality Communities Initiative:

New York State, under the leadership of the Governor, established a Quality Communities Interagency Clearinghouse to bring together State agencies to discuss ways in which they could better coordinate and administer the numerous State Legislative directives and funding mechanisms to better serve the residents of the State of New York. As a result a document was formulated that identifies the recommendations for accomplishing such a goal.

Although there are many recommendations that cover a variety of topics, the two that specifically apply to the Open Space Plan are those on conserving open space and protecting farmlands as a viable economic base. Below are paraphrased recommendations that apply to relevant State agencies.

1. The State will continue to fund open space protection and stewardship initiatives of locally significant open space, significant State open space and farmland protection.
2. It will encourage a partnership with local governments, not-for-profit organizations and private landowners.
3. In addition to funding, local governments are encouraged to use municipal comprehensive planning, zoning laws and development partnerships to set aside open space and recreation lands.

4. The State will further the conservation goals of the State and local governments by providing a tax credit to encourage landowners to donate real property or other interests in real property such as conservation easements.
5. The State will pursue the authorization of the creation of open space districts by local governments.
6. The State will continue and enhance the dedicated funding source for the purchase of development rights on undeveloped land including farmland and study new techniques to protect open space in areas experiencing less development pressure.

Orange County Comprehensive Plan of 2003

In 2003 the County Legislature adopted a significant update of the 1987 Comprehensive Plan. The Plan includes recommendations on open space, recreation and agriculture, among other topics.

Below are a few highlights of some of the recommendations that will influence the content of this plan.

1. Maintain the County's existing parks and strategically purchase or facilitate the preservation of additional parkland or prominent vistas.
2. Conserve the County's natural land resources in a sustainable, linked combination of parks, open space, agricultural lands and waterfront.
3. Identify undeveloped areas of the County as appropriate for permanent open space, establish acquisition priorities and conserve farmland to enhance the open space character of the County as well as diversify its economic base.
4. Utilize the active and passive recreation and open space potential of waterfront resources.
5. Preserve and promote the County's historic heritage.
6. Maintain existing and provide for future expansion of pedestrian and bike trails and corridors in the County.

Orange County Park Master Plan

In 2000 the County Legislature accepted a County Park Master Plan that lays out capital and needs strategies for the County Park System. The Plan surveyed the needs and concerns of the residents and established a direction for the County in the next twenty years. Some of the needs are outlined below. Many of the strategies apply to existing facilities and may consist of plans for active recreation. The open space plan looks at proposals that will expand existing open areas and add needed protection areas to existing park and historic properties.

The Parks Plan outlines two basic goals that encompass a large range of recommended actions. The first goal is to support the County's effort to preserve and enhance the County as a desirable place to live, work, and play for current and future residents. The second goal is to support efforts to maintain through capital programs the existing facilities.

The major strategy for preserving and enhancing the County's open space and historic resources includes taking an inventory of lands for protection, developing acquisition policies for historic protection and open space protection, connecting hiking and biking trails, linking open spaces and historic sites, transferring County-owned lands appropriate for open space, and balancing recreation availability in the County.

Orange County Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan, 1996

Orange County Agricultural Economic Development Strategy, 2004

In 1996, Orange County adopted an agricultural and farmland protection plan, becoming the first county to adopt such a plan in the State. The Orange County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board (AFPB) developed the Plan with the assistance of Cornell Cooperative Extension.

The Plan, which was updated and accepted by the Orange County Legislature in early 2004, provides all County agencies and organizations, led by the County Planning Department and AFPB, with the clear direction and specific strategies that enable them to effectively address critical issues facing agriculture in Orange County. The plan is intended to inform long-term policy formation in support of agriculture while providing a specific short-term work plan to guide local programs and agencies regarding specific agricultural economic development initiatives. The Plan assesses and identifies specific strategies, programs and action projects that best encourage agricultural economic development and foster the protection of the County's most strategic farmland. The Plan is a living document and intended to be modified over time to meet evolving needs.

The plan's goals are to:

- Improve on-farm profitability.
- Enhance agribusiness infrastructure.
- Improve understanding of agriculture as a key economic engine.
- Heighten awareness of agriculture as an important community asset.
- Enhance market access for local agricultural products.
- Increase value-added production activity.
- Engage the public and elected officials in the future of agriculture

Orange County Water Quality Strategy, 2002

Federal regulations under the Clean Water Act, as amended in 1987, require each of the 50 states to address their non-point source water pollution problems. In New York State the job of developing and implementing this requirement along with strategies for protection and enhancing water quality was delegated to the individual counties. In Orange County, the Soil and Water Conservation District took a lead role and in 1992 established an Orange County Water Quality Coordinating Committee. This ad-hoc, interagency committee prepared, and has periodically updated, a strategy identifying primary non-point sources of pollution to be addressed as well as priority surface water bodies where protection and enhancement efforts should be focused.

The 2002 updated Strategy identifies improving water quality in the following streams:

1. Hudson River/Moodna Creek, from Orrs Mills to its confluence with the
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- Hudson River, and the Hudson from river mile 44 to 56.
- 2. Neversink River
- 3. Ramapo River
- 4. Wallkill River

Additionally, this 2002 Strategy identifies two priority County wide issues for enhancement and protection:

- 1. Drinking Water Supplies – both surface reservoirs and underground aquifers.
- 2. Wetlands and other surface water bodies.

Chapter II

Physical and Social Characteristics

Geographic Features

Orange County's natural environment is extremely varied, with distinctive topographic features, water bodies, wetlands and woodlands that need to be preserved, enhanced or carefully developed in those cases where future development is permitted.

The County's rivers and streams, including the Hudson River, the Delaware River and the Walkkill River, are important assets that geographically define the County. The Hudson River Valley, with its steep topography, its built-up communities along the river's shore, and its historic sites, including the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, extends a distance of approximately 21.5 miles, forming the County's eastern edge from just north of the Bear Mountain Bridge to six miles north of the Newburgh-Beacon Bridge.

The less dramatic, but still beautiful Delaware River runs along the western boundaries of Deerpark and Port Jervis, a distance of 7.7 miles in Orange County. Like the Hudson River, the Delaware River provides recreational opportunities for the County and the region. Its role in economic development is more limited than the navigable and tidal Hudson River that has a number of shallow water industrial operations.

The north-flowing Walkkill River, which bisects the County, extends a distance of 33 miles, from Sussex County, New Jersey to the Rondout Creek south of the City of Kingston. The Walkkill River is an important environmental resource, offering additional wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities among a variety of urban and non-urban land uses.

A number of small rivers and streams, including the Ramapo River in Monroe and Tuxedo, Moodna, Creek, and Neversink River, plus numerous ponds, lakes and reservoirs, exist throughout the County. Wetland areas, including Federal and State-designated wetlands, are present in nearly every community in the County. Unlike wetlands that are dispersed throughout the County, the rich "black dirt" soil, a highly valuable agricultural resource, is concentrated in the southern portions of the County, in the vicinity of the Walkkill River corridor. Another productive pocket is found adjacent to the northern boundary of the Village of Chester.

The County's topography ranges in elevation from sea level along the Hudson to over 1,600 feet above sea level to the southwest of Newburgh. The steepest topography in the County is concentrated in two areas. In the western portion, the Shawangunk Mountains provide an eastern slope for the Neversink and a boundary between Orange County and Sullivan County. The Town of Deerpark is also separated from the balance of the County by this mountain ridge. In the east, the Village of Highland Falls, West Point and vicinity are separated from the balance of the County by the Highlands

that extend from the New Jersey border northeastward toward Bear Mountain and the Hudson River.

Between these two mountain ranges, there is gently rolling terrain in the interior portions of the County. However, within this expanse, there are numerous areas where steep slope conditions occur, including large areas in the eastern and southeastern parts of the County. Variations in the topography provide significant opportunities for viewing panoramic vistas of agricultural areas, open spaces and ridgelines.

Additional natural features in the County include large wooded areas, principally along the mountains and steep slopes previously noted and north-south trending watershed and aquifer areas in the western, eastern and south-central portions of the County.

These environmental features have played a major role in shaping the County's existing development pattern. Future development will be channeled carefully recognizing the importance of the remaining essential natural resources that are vital to the County's future.

Orange County has a variety of protected lands used for a variety of purposes (see Maps 3 & 4). The uses range from active parks to trails on rails. Presently there are 92,156 acres of protected open space and 36,515 acres of temporarily protected land in the County. They are identified as follows:

Federal	2,830 acres (permanent) 14,355 acres (temporary)
State	68,900 acres (permanent)
County	2,730 acres (permanent) 3,960 acres (temporary)(proposed reservoir lands)
Municipal	5,840 acres (water supply) 2,370 acres (municipal parks)
Private	9,486 acres (permanent) 18,200 acres (temporary)(480a Forest Tax Law)

Publicly protected acreage is comprised primarily of active parkland and, to a lesser-degree water resources. Privately protected land may include all five categories.

Environmental Constraints (See Map 2b)

Also important is an appreciation that certain federal, state, and municipal environmental regulations effectively limit the development of lands in Orange County, as they do in the remainder of New York State and much of the country. Notable are federal and state designated wetlands, federal designated floodways and floodplains,

and municipally designated steep slopes. While regulations associated with these designations are variable and subject to change, such regulations have served to temporarily protect lands from certain development activity considered inappropriate for these environmental conditions.

Demographic Overview

Historical trends indicate that Orange County has consistently experienced increases in its resident population. The rate of these increases varies from decade to decade. For example, Census figures from 1990 to 2000 reflect an 11% increase in the County's population, while the previous decade, 1980 to 1990, showed a rate of change closer to 19%. A long-term growth rate signals the importance for protecting the open space resources that are essential to support the growth needs. The major resources are recreation lands, water supply locations and farmlands. The protection of scenic areas and habitat regions is essential to having long lasting positive effects on the quality of life that attracts future residents and businesses.

The population for 2000 was 341,367. It positioned the County as the 12th most populated county in New York State and the 4th highest in its rate of growth. Although the County experienced periods of growth spurts, from 1950-1960 and in the subsequent 10-year period (1960-1970) the County's population increased approximately 21%, yet when analyzed over time, the average **annual** growth rate for the County is 1.24%.

Projections suggest the County's population will continue to grow, but at a slower rate than in the 1990s. Projections also indicate that the county's population will gradually grow older, but remain one of the youngest populations in the region. Racial and ethnic diversity is also expected to increase. Significant variation in population characteristics will continue in different areas of the county.

Proprietary data sources (Claritas Inc.) forecast a slower rate, about 0.7% annual for the five-year period up to 2003. For the subsequent five-year period 2003-2008, the growth rate projected by Claritas is even lower at 0.5%. The graph below illustrates both Orange County's population growth outpacing its neighbor counties, especially in the 1980's, in addition to its place as the largest county in this group. Extending this region to include Sullivan and Putnam County, Orange still remains the most populated.

Area	1960	1980	2000	% Change 1960-2000
Orange	183,734	259,603	341,367	86
New York State	16,782,304	17,558,072	18,976,457	13
United States	179,323,175	226,546,000	281,421,906	57

Households, Age Structure, and Racial Diversity

Population increases affect land use, but the most direct effect on both home buying patterns and land use is caused by growth in the number of households. In 1980, the number of households in Orange County was 84,199. By 1990, the county had 101,506 households, reflecting a 20% increase during the 80s.

In 2000, the number of households was 114,788, an increase of 11.57% during the 90s. Forecasts suggest that this slowing in the rate of increase will continue. Households are projected to grow at an annual rate of 1 percent or less through 2020. By 2018, the projected number of households is 124,000. While growth in the number of households may slow in the years ahead, it likely will still outpace population increases.

Orange County's population is slowly growing older, but growth is expected in the youngest segment of the population. The age groups that are expected to grow the fastest in the next twenty years are children in the 0-15 age group and residents in the 45-54 and 55-64 age groups. There will also be growth in the over 65-age group.

With the exception of New York City, Orange County's age distribution mirrors that of the Mid Hudson Region, the State and the Nation. When considering age as life cycle related, the 2000 age distribution chart can be interpreted as patterns of moving through the school system, labor force participation and retirement.

From 2000-2010, the absolute and relative numbers of those in the 25-44 age group are expected to decline. The 25-44 year old segment is anticipated to be 27% of the population by 2020. In 1990, this group was 33% of the population.

By comparison, for this same timeframe, projections suggest that by 2015, the 45-54 age group will be decreasing. The 55-64 age group will continue to increase, and is projected to grow to 14% of the population by 2020, doubling its 1990 percentage. By 2020, the 65-79 age group is estimated to account for 11% of the population, a 3% increase from 1990. A modest increase in the number of those 85 and over is also projected for this period.

While the market for single family homes is likely to be adversely affected by these changes (particularly the decline in the 25-44 age group), the housing market for empty nesters, townhouses, assisted living, retirement communities, and continuing care retirement homes is likely to increase. These changes also imply an increase in the "dependency ratio" in the county (the ratio of non-working to working population) over the next two decades.

Even with the gradual "graying" of the population, in a regional context Orange is a relatively young county. The county's median age of 34.7 years is the lowest in the region. Orange is the only county in the region in which half the population is under 35 years old.

Census figures show Orange is racially and ethnically diverse. The 2000 Census estimates that the County's population was 84% White, 8% Black, and 1.5%

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Asian/Pacific Islander. The Hispanic population, an ethnic category that may include all categories of race, was estimated to be 12%, the largest segment of the minority population.

Census figures indicate slower growth in the white population in Orange County relative to higher growth in other racial population segments. The increase in the Hispanic population is consistent with the growth of this segment in neighboring counties such as Westchester and Rockland.

The Black and Hispanic populations are largely urban. Despite recent immigration from Asia, the Asian population is less than 2%.

In the New York metropolitan region, ethnic diversity varies inversely with proximity to New York City. Orange is less diverse than its southern neighbors, but more diverse than neighbors to the north. A similar pattern is found in the percentage of foreign-born residents, about 7% of Orange County's population.

Jobs, Incomes and Housing Prices

More than 30% of Orange County's workforce commutes to jobs outside the county, primarily in New York City, Westchester and Rockland Counties and northern New Jersey (refer to graphic on page 20). These workers often earn salaries above the County's median income. The local economy employs about 70% of the resident workforce and also attracts about a third of its workers from outside the county. These workers often earn less than the median income.

Housing and Land Use

A major objective of the 2003 County Comprehensive Plan is to encourage a development pattern of land use over the next 20 years that accommodates population and housing growth while fostering economic development and maintaining the open space and rural character of the County. A comparison of the residential development pattern with the urban-rural growth concept of the 1987 Comprehensive Plan Update shows that much of the residential development has taken place outside of the core urban areas defined in that Plan. In 2000, approximately 18% of the County's population resides in the cities, while 61% live in the towns, and the remaining 21% reside in the villages.

New housing construction is one of the most important determinants of future land use patterns. An estimated total of 15,322 building permits were issued for the period 1990-2000, resulting in an annual average of about 1,392 building permits. Assuming permits continue to be issued at this rate, about 27,840 permits will be issued over the next twenty years. If construction occurs at this rate, it is estimated that 28,000 acres (about 5%) of the County's 522,000 acres of remaining developable acreage would be needed to support residential construction over the next 20 years. The anticipated lower growth in the number of households over this period, however, suggests that residential construction may also occur at a lower rate.

If current trends continue much of the residential development in the next twenty years will occur in Monroe, Chester, Warwick, Blooming Grove, Woodbury, Montgomery and New Windsor areas. Other areas like Deerpark, Greenville, Wawayanda, Minisink and Mount Hope are also likely to experience growth in residential development, though as the existing population base is relatively small these increases will not represent as many new residents as in the larger towns. Large-scale residential developments in the southeastern part of the County could further skew the geographic distribution of growth over the next decade. Since housing construction in the County's villages and cities is generally in-fill or redevelopment, units in these areas don't represent large-scale conversion of vacant or agricultural land.

Non-Residential Growth

Orange County offers excellent Interstate highway access, rivaling many States, as well as relative land affordability when compared to the metropolitan areas to the south and east. If current market trends persist, growth in commercial, industrial and institutional land uses is anticipated over the next five years and beyond. The location of these uses, whether along corridors, at interchanges or downtown centers will place demands on existing vacant or agricultural land. Business parks, a priority site location marketed by Empire State Development Corporation and the Orange County Partnership, will remain priorities, but may quickly get built out.

Historic and future growth patterns for such uses are expected, and are encouraged to mirror the availability of public infrastructure and services. The primary elements of this infrastructure are roads and centralized sewer and water. This Plan seeks to encourage appropriate locations for such uses to allow efficient access for employees, maximizing the use of the current road capacity as well as the provision of transit services, primarily bus but including train and aviation services.

Connections from such locations to transportation hubs and centers are critical. Ideally, new or expanding commercial, industrial or institutional land uses first seek options in immediate proximity to population centers with adequate public services. Where this is not possible, corridor, interchange or crossroad locations may work as long as environmental and transportation impacts are mitigated, and key open spaces or prime agricultural lands are avoided.