



A Land-Based Approach to Growth: An Analysis of the Town of Thompson

**A White Paper from
2012 Pattern Fellows**

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Introduction

Economic development and environmental conservation have long been viewed as mutually exclusive. This paradigm was challenged by the Open Space Institute (OSI) in its 2011 report, "Private Lands, Public Benefits: Open Space Resources and Preferred Growth Areas in the Catskills."¹ By identifying "preferred growth areas," OSI takes the first step in determining how appropriately sited economic development can coexist with important natural resources.

The OSI report examined existing development and environmental resources in the four counties comprising the Catskill Mountain region: Sullivan, Ulster, Delaware and Greene. The study identified natural resources, lands already developed and lands with regulatory and physical constraints: agricultural soils, water resources and wetlands, wildlife habitat, conserved areas, lands devoted to recreation, steep and unstable slopes. By omitting these areas, OSI identified remaining lands that could be developed for economic purposes "without compromising the economy or ecology of private farm or forestland resources." These areas, referred to as "preferred growth areas," are a starting place for considering where to locate development without directly affecting agriculture, water quality, recreation, and wildlife habitat. The report is careful to explain that additional locally important resources and off-site impacts from development must also be considered.

OSI identified 520,000 of 2.7 million acres in the four county Catskills region as preferred growth areas. One conclusion is that overall, the Catskills could accommodate four times the current level of economic development (if located appropriately) without directly affecting sensitive ecological resources. The point wasn't that all of this land should be developed, but that there is enough land available that a 'win-win' for conservation and development should be possible. The challenge is to make the information available to towns and developers, and to encourage them to locate the development appropriately. To that end, OSI drilled down to analyze individual counties, towns and villages and created both data tables and maps to illustrate and identify preferred growth areas at a more local level.²

Through Pattern for Progress' (PFP) leadership training program, the Pattern Fellows Program, a team of Fellows was assigned to see how the data contained in "Private Lands Public Benefits" could be applied to an individual town. In

¹ The report can be viewed and downloaded at http://www.osiny.org/site/PageServer?pagename=Research_Catskills_PrivateLands_PublicBenefits

² See above link.

Sullivan County, the Town of Thompson—which includes the village of Monticello--has the second largest percentage of preferred growth area of any town and also has prospects for significant economic development; the Town was also interested in serving as a pilot project. The Fellows team used the data collected by OSI, with supervision provided by Pattern, plus additional local data such as zoning, water and sewer, and roads, to develop recommendations on refining the preferred growth areas. The Fellows also used the OSI report and data to examine the site of a proposed large-scale destination resort to show how the data can be used on the project level. Finally, the Fellows project sought to learn whether this work could be replicated across any municipality or project in the four-county Catskill region.

This report is neither an endorsement of nor a statement against development of one kind or another in the Town of Thompson. It is also not intended to be a substitute for site-specific project review, environmental due diligence, or the SEQRA process. Instead, guided by determinations of preferred growth areas, and supplemented with other local information, this report is a demonstration of how the preferred growth area concept, and the data behind this concept, can be used on a town-wide or large project site scale. It is the hope of the Fellows project that necessary economic development might proceed more quickly and with the least ecological impacts if stakeholders can begin the process with the comprehensive knowledge of where resources are located.

OSI Report Findings Summarized for Town of Thompson

Refer to Maps 1 and 2.

The Town of Thompson, located in south central Sullivan County, is approximately 56,000 acres and includes the Village of Monticello. State Route 17 (Future Interstate 86), the 4-lane east-west highway through southern New York, bisects Thompson and there are 10 interchanges within the town. Major secondary roads include State Route 42 which runs north-south through the Town and the Village of Monticello and State Route 17B which connects Monticello to the Town of Bethel and the popular Bethel Woods Center for the Arts.

“Private Land Public Benefits” found that 12% of the Town of Thompson is already developed, 3% protected, and the remainder is private undeveloped land. Over 27,000 acres are classified as preferred growth areas—49% of the entire town, or 57% of private undeveloped lands. These numbers are well above average, as some towns had 0% of their land identified as preferred growth areas. Preferred growth areas are those lands that are not already

protected and do not overlap with regionally identified open space natural resources, developed, or regulated lands and steep slopes.

The town has a number of development proposals under review including a hotel and a large scale destination resort.

Where to Build in the Town of Thompson and Why

Refer to Map 1: Town of Thompson Preferred Growth Areas.

The Fellows used the data collected by OSI, plus additional local data such as zoning, water and sewer, and roads, to develop recommendations on refining the preferred growth areas in the Town of Thompson. As a starting point, OSI defined a “preferred growth area” as undeveloped land that is privately owned and without identified natural resources, physical impediments or regulations against development. If such private lands also have access to existing infrastructure and amenities, they become more suitable for development, and they are called “primary preferred growth” areas for the purposes of this analysis.

In Thompson, there are private lands north of the Village of Monticello which were identified as “primary preferred growth areas”. This section of the town is easily accessible from Route 17 (I-86) due to several interchanges over a short distance, as well as from local routes. There are also 4 water and sewer districts (the Village of Monticello, Harris, Kutshers, and Kiamesha), and therefore it’s possible that development in this area can be located in or tap into these existing water/sewer districts. Three of the treatment facilities have confirmed unused capacity (See Map 1).

Land between the Village of Monticello and the Mongaup Creek, along the Route 17B corridor, is also considered a primary preferred growth area. This portion of the town has good access to Route 17 (I-86), and potential connectivity to existing public water and sewer (Village of Monticello). It is a heavily traveled corridor as it connects Route 17 to nearby Bethel Woods.

Locations of Important Natural Resources in the Town of Thompson

Refer to Map 2: Town of Thompson Natural Resources, Conserved and Developed Lands

The Town of Thompson has significant natural resources. Approximately 39% of the Town contains lands that are neither developed nor preferred growth. Much of this area includes riparian corridors and numerous lakes and ponds dispersed throughout the Town. There is a large concentration of natural resources in the eastern portion of Thompson. The Neversink River and its associated gorge contain a high quality stream with wildlife and habitat of concern, steep slopes, and other regulated attributes, and an important aquifer underlies the Neversink River Corridor. The River is located within the Neversink River Unique Area, which is administered by the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation. The southeastern corner of the town contains the 585 acre Wolf Brook Multiple Use Area and extensive acreage of intact large forest block. Large forest blocks are ecologically important because they are not fragmented by roads, are lightly- or undeveloped, and thus can support a wide variety of flora and fauna not found in more developed areas.

An additional area of concentrated important natural resources is in the extreme western portion of the Town along the border with Bethel. This area includes the Mongaup River and its associated regulated corridor and aquifer.

Planned Resort Development District Analysis

Refer to Maps 3 and 4: Town of Thompson PRD Zone Analysis

The Fellows analyzed the Planned Resort Development (PRD) zoning district using the same data collected by Open Space Institute and supplemented by additional information including water, sewer, and roads. The PRD is a 1735 acre area located north of the Village of Monticello. This zone is the location of the proposed Entertainment Properties Trust (EPT) destination resort. There are extensive planning documents, including an environmental assessment, regarding the EPT proposal on file with the Town and available on its website³. This proposed development is subject to full environmental review and public comment under SEQRA. The purpose of the Fellows Project was to quickly examine the attributes of an active project area to determine how the OSI report can be focused to the site-specific level.

EPT Concord II, LLC ("EPT") proposes to develop a master planned destination resort community (referred to as "EPT Concord Resort") on approximately 1,538 acres of land that it owns within the PRD (the "Project Site"). The site is bordered on the north by Sullivan County Route 109, on the south by New York State Route 17, on the east by County Route 161 and Downs Road and on the west by New York State Route 42. EPT proposes an 18-hole golf course, a racino and harness racing track, hotels, a residential village with a mix of unit types including condos, apartments, townhouses and detached single family homes, a civic center, a medical home, an active adult community, an entertainment district with cinema and supporting retail, an RV park, and a multi-use trail system. The proposed EPT Concord Resort is anticipated to take approximately 10 years to fully build out. Construction for Phase 1 of the project could begin in November of 2012 and 5 subsequent phases may occur as market conditions allow.

The PRD district contains approximately 450 acres of developed lands which include the site of the original Concord Resort (now demolished) and the existing golf course. The district also contains 615 acres of OSI-identified preferred growth areas. The PRD zone includes the Kiamesha Sewer District and the wastewater treatment plant, which currently has approximately 500,000 gpd of unused capacity⁴, representing 40% of the demand for the new development. There are approximately 332 acres of "regulated" lands which include watercourses, wetlands, steep slopes, lakes, and other natural resources. There is also an aquifer under a portion of the property; this attribute was identified by

³ http://www.townofthompson.com/page_Public_Documents.html

⁴ Bill Culligan, Superintendent, Town of Thompson Water and Sewer District

Sullivan County in its 2008 report "Conserving Open Space and Managing Growth: A Strategy for Sullivan County."

Methods and Analysis

"Private Lands Public Benefits" provides maps, data and analysis to help identify approaches to conservation and development. The report identified more than 520,000 acres of privately owned land without physical impediments, restrictions against development or important open space resources.

To scale the report down from the region and county level to a single town, the Fellows used the mapping data from OSI⁵ and supplemented it with local data including roads, water and sewer information, and local zoning. This local data was available from the Town and Sullivan County. The maps within the OSI report were then revised to focus on the town, and a driving tour conducted by the Fellows confirmed the large amount of undeveloped and under-developed acreage, as well as opportunities for infill in the Village of Monticello.

The Fellows held a meeting with the Town Supervisor to review the project and the various development proposals before the town. The Fellows chose the EPT project site/PRD Zone as a test case due to its size and immediacy, as the project was unveiled to the public on March 8, 2012.

The mapping overlay and driving tour identified areas for potential development and that were consistent with current zoning. Additionally, these areas had the appropriate infrastructure to support development and enjoyed a concentration of preferred growth areas.

The Fellows attempted to anticipate the type and amount of related or ancillary development that may come to the Town of Thompson if a large scale destination resort were built. To that end, other casino towns were surveyed and studies reviewed to understand the ancillary development that the casino would bring and where such development was typically located in relation to the casino. This research showed that the casino towns surveyed did not see marked new development following the casinos.

⁵ Available on line at
http://www.osiny.org/site/PageServer?pagename=Research_Catskills_PrivateLands_PublicBenefits

Conclusion

This report is an example of how the regional data sets collected by Open Space Institute, supplemented with additional local information, can be used to examine the resources of a single town and a large project area. This report also shows that by aggregating multiple data sets into a single layer, maps can be developed which are simple and informative. The town of Thompson was proactive in its willingness to look at this data as a planning resource and now has essential information to help determine the most feasible places for development. Thompson can also provide leadership in showing where growth and sorely needed economic development can benefit not only the Town, but also the entire County.

While the town of Thompson has abundant “preferred growth areas”, some towns have correspondingly little. The data can also be applied in these towns to begin to focus development on a few primary areas. Additionally, this report shows that a large project area can be quickly and efficiently analyzed and the various attributes – natural resources, developed lands, preferred growth areas – mapped and displayed in an easily understood graphic format.

“Private Lands, Public Benefits” is ground-breaking. It contains data and maps, assembled and produced by conservation organizations, that show where development could occur with minimal projected impact on important natural resources. The report is a planning tool, and should be used to initiate a discussion regarding where development may or may not occur. Private Lands, Public Benefits can be used alongside other initiatives like comprehensive plans, natural resources inventories, zoning updates and changes, generic environmental impact statements.

The Catskills region of New York State has for more than a hundred years been known for its unique and plentiful natural resources. While citizens and elected officials agree that these resources must be protected, it is inevitable, and appropriate, that economic development is critical to the region. Now, “Private Lands, Public Benefits” makes information available that can harmonize conservation and development, allowing the Catskills to grow without sacrificing the charm that has made the region special for so long.