

A Vision For The Skaneateles Highlands

Findings From A Conservation Planning and Stakeholder Survey Project



Completed By Mark Whitmore and the Finger Lakes Land Trust
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The Finger Lakes Land Trust is a membership supported not for profit land conservation organization protecting those lands that define the character of the Finger Lakes region. Founded in 1989, the Land Trust works to conserve the beautiful, wild, and working landscapes of the 12 county region by establishing nature preserves and conservation areas which are open to the public, holding voluntary conservation easements on private lands, educating for responsible stewardship, and providing technical assistance to local governments and landowners.

Within the Skaneateles Lake Watershed, the Land Trust has completed a half dozen land protection projects—conserving more than a mile of wooded habitat along Bear Swamp Creek, securing continued public access to Carpenter’s Falls, and protecting more than 100 acres of mature forest on the east side of the Lake.

Please consider becoming a member of the Finger Lakes Land Trust and supporting the Land Trust’s efforts. If you are interested in learning more about the Land Trust or becoming a member visit www.filt.org or call 607-275-9487.



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Skaneateles Lake

is one of the most picturesque of the Finger Lakes.

Its headwaters lay in the steep valleys and rolling hills to the south, an area known as the Skaneateles Highlands. Encompassing some of the region's most pristine remaining shoreline, as well as a remarkable diversity of natural and cultural landscapes, the Skaneateles Highlands are widely recognized for their scenic beauty as well as their regional significance.

Though still rural in character, the Highlands are experiencing increasing development pressure—particularly in proximity to Skaneateles Lake. Lakefront and “lake view” development is spurred by sky rocketing land values and increasing property tax burdens. Development of even individual home sites can have a significant environmental impact within some portions of the Highlands due to its steep hillsides, unbroken forests, and pristine wetlands.

While there is widespread recognition of the values associated with the rural character of this landscape, there are currently no programs in place to effectively address the adverse impacts associated with the increasing pace of piecemeal development in the area.

The Skaneateles Highlands Conservation Planning and Stakeholder Project was initiated by the Finger Lakes Land Trust to work with a variety of public and private partners to complete an assessment of natural resources within this area; engage local communities and other stakeholders to consider options for conserving significant open space resources; interview landowners regarding their goals and attitudes; and ultimately develop a common vision and a plan for advancing conservation of this remarkable landscape.

The Land Trust thanks the Allyn Foundation, Central New York Regional Planning and Development Board, and the New York State Conservation Partnership Program, administered by the Land Trust Alliance with support from the State of New York, for their generous support of this project.



View from southern end of Skaneateles Lake



Natural Resources of the Skaneateles Highlands

The Water

Skaneateles Lake

Skaneateles Lake is a shining jewel and a resource cherished by generations of residents and visitors alike. It is an important source of drinking water, recreation, and scenic beauty. The purity of the lake's water is such that it is one of only six unfiltered public drinking water sources in the country and the City of Syracuse uses on average 43 million gallons of lake water per day. It is because Skaneateles has relatively low nutrient levels that it has such a high level of water purity. This level of quality has been maintained by the rural character of the lake's watershed and the responsible management of its natural resources.



Grout Brook and Bear Swamp Creek

Grout Brook and Bear Swamp Creek are the two largest streams within the Skaneateles Lake Watershed and their combined watersheds comprise almost a third of the land area. Both creeks are protected trout streams and even in extreme drought conditions Grout Brook stays cool and has a continuous flow. A long, narrow marsh forms the headwaters of Bear Swamp Creek which flows over the dramatic 90 foot high Carpenter's Falls and through a deep gorge before entering the Lake.

Small Streams and Waterfalls



The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) has mapped over 100 small and intermittent streams that have cut gorges into the steep hillsides adjacent to the lake. A few of the streams are larger and generally run year-round, but dry up during drought events. These streams drain numerous small wetlands and during storm events can carry significant amounts of silt into the lake.

Skaneateles Highlands Sub-Watersheds

The health of Skaneateles Lake depends upon the condition of lands within its watershed as well as the character of the numerous watercourses that feed into it. Sediment eroding from any of the many streams feeding the lake may ultimately contribute to the growth of aquatic weeds within the Lake.

If Skaneateles is to retain its reputation as the most pristine of all the Finger Lakes, careful attention must be paid not just to its shoreline, but also to the condition of each and every one of the streams that flow into the Lake. Future development must be undertaken with great care to ensure that water quality is not impaired. In addition, the permanent protection of sensitive streamside areas and steeply sloping hillsides should be pursued.





The Wetlands

Bear Swamp

This 435-acre wetland is the largest in the Skaneateles Highlands. Located within the towns of Sempronius and Niles, much of this wetland is included in the Bear Swamp State Forest but it also includes many privately owned parcels. The wetlands have been largely undisturbed over the years and harbor a number of unusual plants.

“Bear Swamp is the most significant spot in the Finger Lakes for the diversity and abundance of many unusual plants, especially orchids. It’s an amazing habitat for all sorts of animals as well,” says F. Robert Wesley, a Cornell University botanist. Dr. Peter Ducey, a herpetologist at SUNY Cortland, adds that the area is virtually unexplored and is likely to be an important habitat for amphibians and reptiles.



Lakeshore Wetlands

Grout Brook passes through a largely undisturbed 60-acre wetland that is located at the south end of the lake. The shoreline in this area is undeveloped and the wetlands are mostly cattail and grass marsh with some forested swamp. This wetland plays a key role in helping to maintain water quality at the lake’s south end.

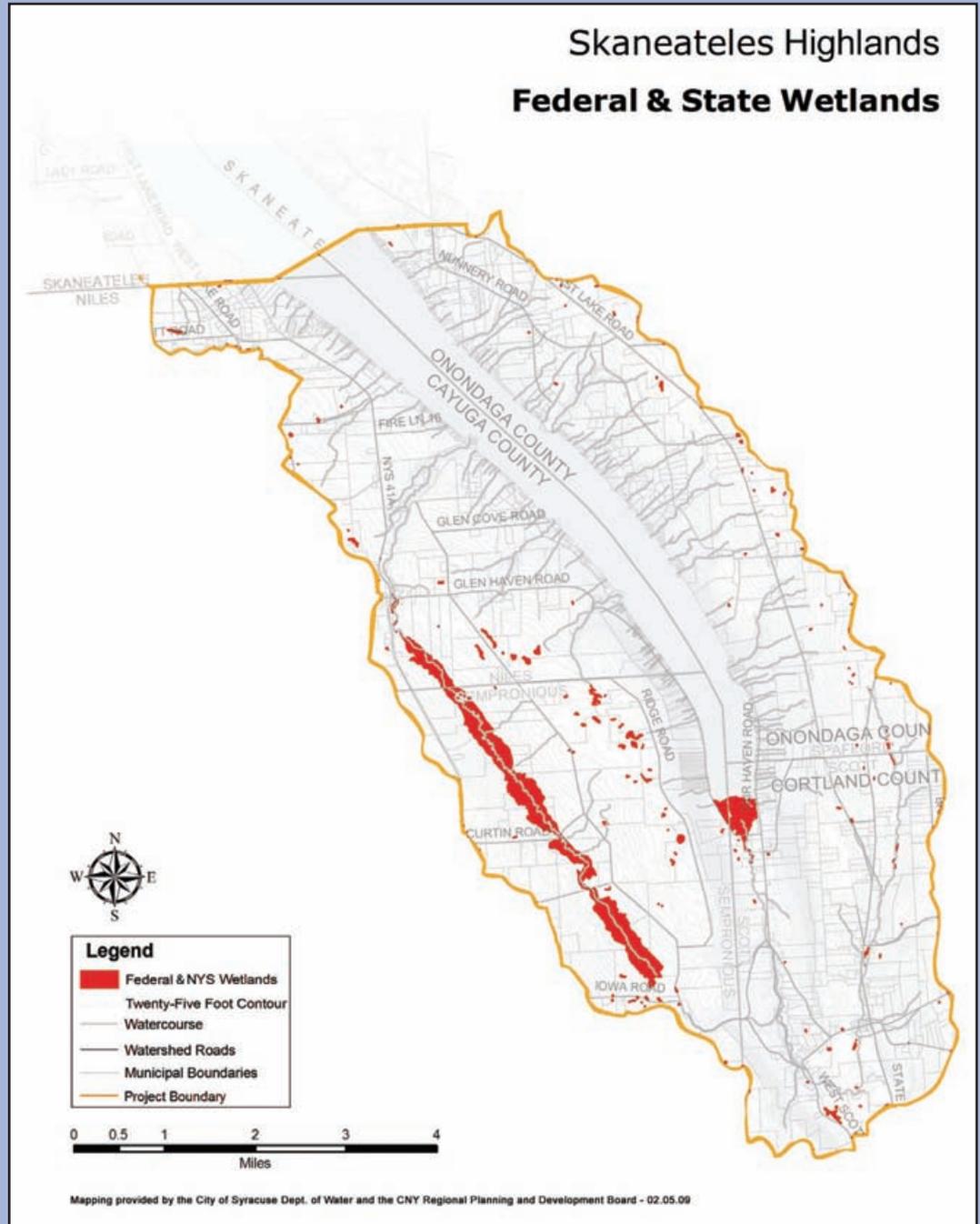
Small Perched Wetlands

There are over 150 small, isolated wetlands mapped by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service within the Skaneateles Highlands. Most are perched above the steep hillsides that surround the lake. The majority of these wetlands feed streams that flow directly into the lake and according to Dr. Robert Werner of the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, are therefore important buffers for nutrients entering the lake. In addition, these small wetlands are important to wildlife in the area.

Skaneateles Highlands Federal & State Wetlands

Wetlands within the Skaneateles Highlands range from hundreds of acres of streamside habitat within the boggy wilds of Bear Swamp to modest seasonal “puddles” that might serve as the home for a single wood frog. The full range of wetlands found in this area are critically important for local wildlife populations as well as the health of Skaneateles Lake.

As with the Lake, the health of a wetland depends upon the condition of the surrounding landscape. Key issues to be addressed include the maintenance of adequate wetland buffer areas, minimizing hydrological changes due to roadside ditches and culverts, and the monitoring and control of non-native, invasive plant species.





The Farms

Farming has been an important part of the cultural and scenic landscape in the Skaneateles Highlands for generations. There are currently twenty-one farms in the Highlands occupying approximately 9,200 acres of land. The farms range in size from 10 to 2,000 acres, with an average size of about 400 acres.

Fifteen of the farms are engaged in some form of livestock farming. Dairy is the single most common farming operation in the Highlands with nine producing farms – one with over 700 head. Other farms raise beef, sheep, horses, buffalo, hogs, and poultry.

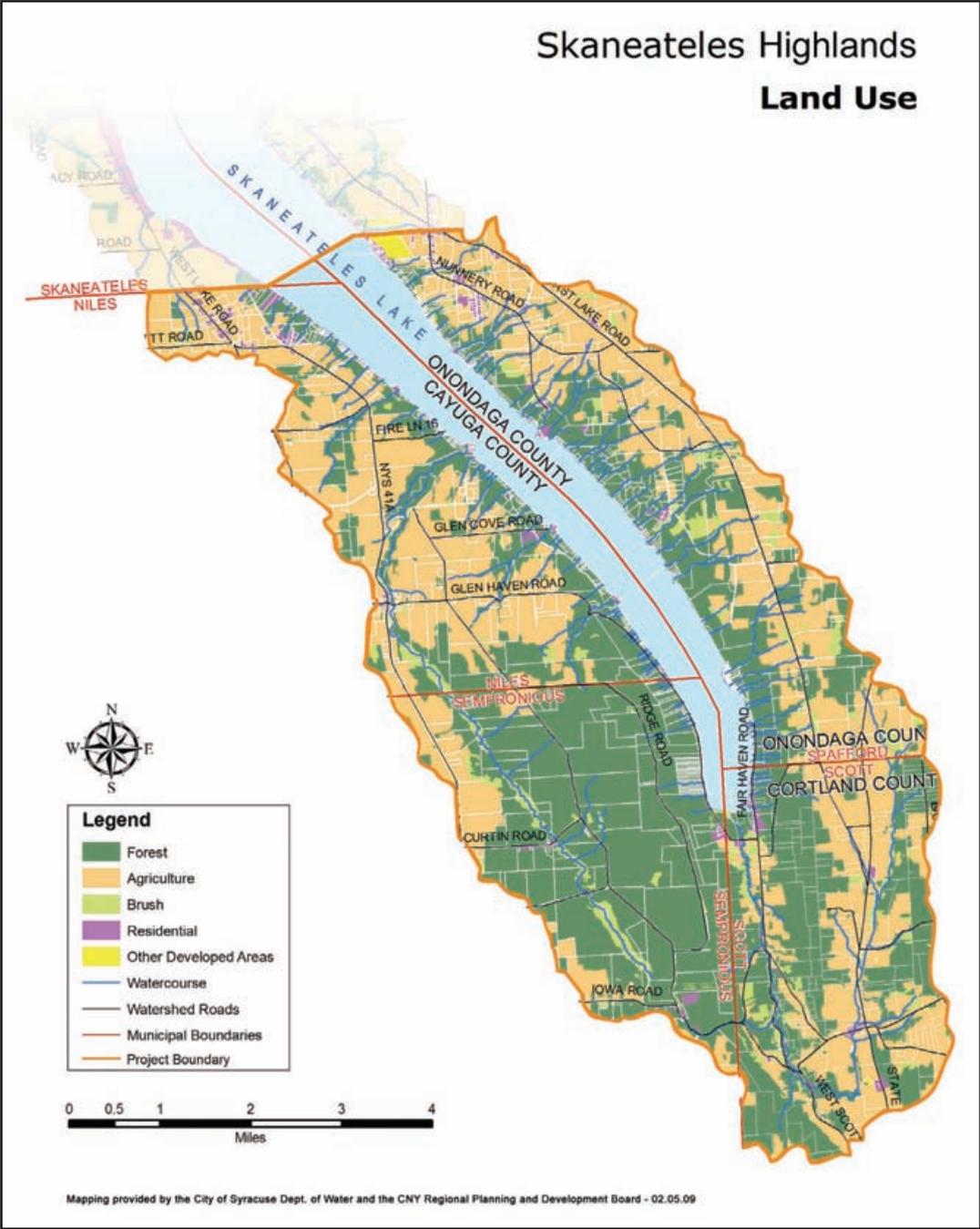
Six of the farms in the Skaneateles Highlands grow only field crops which include corn, soybeans, oats, wheat, and hay. With changing markets, other kinds of farming operations are beginning to appear in the area. For instance, a small farm was recently established in the Highlands and now produces organic produce.

Most of the farms in operation today have been in the same family for up to four or five generations. All farmers interviewed stated a desire to keep the farms working in the future. Nil farmer Chad Matijas summed up a common sentiment: “I’m farming because this farm has been in the family for generations and I feel a deep commitment to continue the tradition.”

Skaneateles Highlands Land Use

The Skaneateles Highlands are truly a mosaic of agricultural lands and forest habitat. On both shores of Skaneateles Lake, a belt of rich woodland is backed by productive agricultural fields. To the south, Bear Swamp's heavy clay soils make farming difficult and result in a sizable block of forest that occupies the high ground southwest of the Lake.

The Highlands remain overwhelmingly rural, with development clustered on the shoreline as well as in several hamlets that are modest in size. Despite the area's rural character, land ownership is fragmented. Apart from the 21 farms in the Highlands, landowners typically own relatively small parcels. Consequently, achieving the protection of a single hillside might ultimately require more than a dozen conservation agreements.





The Forests

The forests of the Skaneateles Highlands play a critical role in ensuring the lake's water quality. These forests also form expansive green vistas and have been used for recreation and timber for generations.

Nearly 10,000 acres of woodland in the vicinity of the south end of the lake have been recognized by Audubon New York as one of the state's "Important Bird Areas." This area includes Bear Swamp State Forest as well as the Finger Lakes Land Trust's High Vista Nature Preserve.

The forest is noteworthy for the presence of breeding Cerulean Warblers – a species considered to be "Severely-at-Risk" which is highly restricted in distribution and is suffering from low population levels. In addition, these woodlands harbor a diversity of other birds including the Northern Goshawk and 20 species of breeding warblers.

Steep Valley Slopes

The extensive contiguous forests of the Skaneateles Highlands are an important part of the scenic beauty of the area. The forests on the east side of the lake are more southerly in origin with a predominance of oak and hickory. Whereas forests on the western side of the lake, particularly on the steeper slopes, are more northerly in origin with a predominance of maple, birch and hemlock.

Gorges, Large and Small

Forests lining the multitude of gorges in the Highlands are important buffers to maintain the water quality in the many streams of all sizes. Large old trees can be found in some of the gorges, such as along the lower reaches of Bear Swamp Creek. Hemlocks are an important part of these forests, providing shade to cool the gorges and creek water in the summer and providing cover for wildlife in the winter.

The Scenery

The scenic resources of Skaneateles Lake are considered by many to be some of the finest in the Finger Lakes. There are sweeping views of the lake, lush forested hillsides, and pastoral farms, visible from many vantage points in the Highlands.

Travelers along the highways in the Highlands can't help but be impressed by the spectacular vistas. Views from secondary roads are often just as impressive. However, there is only one developed scenic turnout on a highway in the Highlands and some views are becoming obstructed by the growth of trees and other roadside vegetation.

Considering the scenic resources, Highlands resident and artist Ed Levine states: "I've been painting for 35 years and came to the area for just a few weeks one summer and have stayed ever since. That was almost 20 years ago. I love this place, especially the Highlands - the scenery is world-class. Every moment something is changing like the light or the clouds and the whole scene is different. It is so inspiring to live and paint in such a beautiful place. I hope we can act to preserve this beauty for future generations."





Recreational Opportunities

For many, the draw of recreation in the Skaneateles Highlands is irresistible. Indeed recreation along the shores of Skaneateles Lake has been a part of the lives of many families for generations. Recreational opportunities in the Highlands include boating on the lake, swimming, hiking, skiing, hunting, fishing, birdwatching, and snowmobiling.

Public lake access developed for boating is currently limited to the Town of Scott Park and two privately owned marinas in the towns of Niles and Scott. Currently there is no public access for swimming within the southern half of Skaneateles Lake.

Trail systems are available for public use at four locations in the Highlands. Bear Swamp State Forest has 13 miles of trails that are open for hiking, skiing, biking, horseback riding, and snowmobiling. Winter sports are particularly good in this area as the site's high elevation results in longer retention of the snowpack than surrounding areas.

In addition to the state forest trail system, a mile-long trail known as the "Jug Path" was recently re-established along Bear Swamp Creek, extending from Carpenter's Falls to the western shore of Skaneateles Lake. Modest trail systems are also found at the Finger Lakes Land Trust's High Vista Preserve and in the Central New York Land Trust's High Hickory Wildlife Sanctuary – both located above the lake's eastern shore.

Fishing access points developed by the NYSDEC are found along the lower part of Grout Brook and on Bear Swamp Creek in the State Forest. Hunting has always been popular throughout the Highlands on private property as well as in Hewitt State Forest and in Bear Swamp State Forest.

The Threat of Poorly Planned Development

Increasing Development Pressure

Development is the primary threat to the character and integrity of both the Skaneateles Highlands and Skaneateles Lake. Even a single development in the wrong location can forever alter scenic vistas or create unintended ecological problems. Nearly every person contacted in this study was concerned about the possibility of development bringing undesired change to the area. Although the population of the four towns in the Highlands has remained relatively stable over the past decade, it is anticipated that this may change in the near future.

Even without population growth, sprawling development patterns can pose a threat to the region. Cornell researcher Rolf Pendall recognized this issue in his 2003 publication *Sprawl Without Growth, The Upstate Paradox*. “Between 1982 and 1997, Upstate New York converted over 425,000 acres of land from rural uses to urban development, a 30 percent increase in urban acreage. Over this same 15-year period, the Upstate population grew by only 2.6 percent. As population growth has slowed, moreover, land consumption has accelerated.” Dr. Pendall went on to discuss the implications of this sprawl: “By many definitions, sprawl has been shown fairly consistently to degrade wildlife habitat, threaten agricultural productivity, and raise the cost of public services at all levels of government.”

Cayuga County Planner Steve Lynch summed up his impression of the development pressure facing the Skaneateles Highlands by stating: “...there are more and more inquiries about this area from people in the urban areas of New York City and New Jersey and considering the relatively low cost of land and the elderly demographics of the farming community the potential for the sale and development of farmlands and other properties with great views is high.”

Niles farmer Steve Nemecek adds, “We can’t keep raising taxes and expect the farms to continue operations.” Regarding development pressure in the area he added: “This is one of the last places that the big land boom hasn’t hit...you just wait.”



Limited Land Use Planning

Land use planning is one of the most important tools a community has to determine how and where development will occur. Without a clear and well thought out land use plan, development may take place on an ad hoc basis – sometimes leading to the loss of community values and the degradation of natural resources.

Comprehensive planning is a method by which communities can, as a group, identify their values and determine their future goals for conservation and development. While not an end in and of itself, comprehensive planning is an important prerequisite for effective guidelines for development.

As of yet, no towns within the Highlands have formally adopted comprehensive plans. The Town of Niles, however, is nearing completion of a comprehensive plan, and the Town of Scott is also working on a plan.



West Shore of Skaneateles Lake - Town of Sempronius - Existing Conditions 2008



West Shore of Skaneateles Lake - Town of Sempronius - Simulated Development with 5+ Acre Zoning

Conventional or existing land use and subdivision regulations are inconsistent throughout the Skaneateles Highlands and may not necessarily support communities' stated desires to conserve their rural character. For example, a regulation calling for generous minimum lot sizes may preclude clustering of development away from sensitive resources. In addition, the stipulation of large lot sizes may simply increase fragmentation of our rural landscape.

Only two of the towns in the Highlands have zoning laws (Scott and Spafford), three have subdivision regulations (Scott, Spafford, and Niles) but only one has site plan review (Niles) for proposed development projects. The Town of Sempronius has no land use regulation beyond a minimum lot size.

The status of land use planning within the Highlands is typical for much of upstate New York. This area has not experienced much growth in recent years and, consequently, there has not been a significant investment in land use planning. Now, however, many rural communities are not adequately prepared for the increasing development pressure they may face.

Increasing Pressure on Water Resources

Increasing development within the Highlands and the increased use of lakeside dwellings are growing concerns for the ongoing maintenance of water quality. In particular, the clearing of hillside forests for “lake view” house lots can have a significant adverse impact on water quality by reducing the forests’ buffering capacity.

Marion Balyszak, Director of the Finger Lakes Institute states: “The effect of lakeside forest development has already been documented in the Seneca and Canandaigua Lake watersheds. Water quality is compromised with increased erosion producing undue sediment and nutrient loading.”

The pressure on water quality is further increased as older, established lakeside “camps” are upgraded or replaced with larger structures and manicured landscaping. The result is frequently the increased use of septic systems, greater use of lawn chemicals, and increased storm water runoff from impervious surfaces such as roofs, driveways, and patios.

Residential wastewater treatment systems have been recognized as a problem in the Skaneateles Highlands. Syracuse water engineer Dan Robbino says that most of the wastewater systems in the Highlands are traditional septic systems and that most old septic tanks that he has seen excavated have failed or are no longer water tight. Many of these tanks are greater than 20 to 30 years old and are made of steel.



Robbino stressed that it is very difficult to detect failure without a visual inspection of the tank interior. The City of Syracuse, and counties in the Highlands, do not have the authority to require this type of inspection so they are all done on a voluntary basis or as part of a building renovation project. The problem arises because old homes and camps in the Highlands do not need to replace their septic systems until failure has been detected, and because inspections are performed infrequently, failed systems can go undetected for years.



A Vision for the Future of the Skaneateles Highlands

The conservation of Skaneateles Lake and its surrounding countryside is not a new idea. Almost 150 years ago, famed artist and Skaneateles resident John D. Barrow recognized the unique attributes of the region and the need to take steps to conserve those aspects valued by residents:

“Let us especially remember the beauty of our lake and its shores, and resolve that henceforth, that present beauty, and in some measure at least the restoration of the old, shall ever be in our thoughts and among the constant and zealous efforts of our lives. May we do something to this end, so that after another hundred years, our ancestors shall meet together and rejoice, and thank us for what we may have done for the pleasure and honest pride of their lives; when Skaneateles Lake shall be as nature intended, the loveliest and most alluring of all our inland waters.” John D. Barrow, 1876 Centennial Address, Skaneateles.

It has now been more than 100 years since Barrow’s centennial address and never before has his call to action been more compelling. One need only look to other Finger Lakes communities that are grappling with deteriorating water quality and the unintended consequences of sprawling development. Bold action is needed to ensure the integrity of Skaneateles Lake and its associated highlands.

All who care about this spectacular place must work together to create a future that allows for growth and change, yet ensures that it only happens in a way that also provides for the health of the lake; maintains a continued strong agricultural presence; fosters the creation of a network of protected open space that provides for ecological integrity as well as recreational opportunities; and strengthens the local economy through compatible economic development associated with the region’s unique scenic, cultural, and recreational resources.

A Conservation Easement Donation: Jack & Janet Lowe

Jack and Janet Lowe bought their property 30 years ago as a nearby summer retreat from their home in Ithaca. They searched the region for a long time before finally settling on 87 acres of fields and forest located just east of the hamlet of New Hope.

Over time, the Lowes built a pond as well as a small cabin for summertime use. They’ve enjoyed managing their land to enhance wildlife habitat, particularly for birds. As long time members of the Finger Lakes Land Trust they were familiar with conservation easements and in 2008, after 15 years of careful deliberation, they decided upon an easement for their land.

Their easement provides for stringent protection of wetland areas along Bear Swamp Creek while allowing for continued management of nearby forests and the ability to maintain agricultural fields or to mow them for wildlife. Future construction of additional buildings is limited to an area adjacent to the road and subdivision of the property is forbidden.

Today, the Lowes continue to enjoy their land and they’re pleased with their decision to donate an easement. According to Jack Lowe they “wanted to keep it wild so others in the future can enjoy nature as we have.”



Jack Lowe

Conservation Success Story

The following are key elements that will be needed if we are to achieve this vision for the Skaneateles Highlands:

- A systematic effort to permanently protect farmland and other significant open space parcels through the use of conservation easements is urgently needed. A conservation easement is a permanent legal agreement that limits future development while allowing land to remain in private ownership. In some cases, the select acquisition of key parcels for conservation is also called for.
- A more robust and comprehensive approach to land use planning is needed—one that fosters greater inter-municipal cooperation and incorporates meaningful review of development proposals and the promotion of clustering and other tools to minimize landscape fragmentation.
- The feasibility of creating a Skaneateles Lake Scenic Byway should be explored. The Byway would be based upon State Routes 41 and 41A and should include enhanced opportunities to experience the region’s scenic beauty and interpret its resources.
- In conjunction with the development of the Scenic Byway, compatible recreational opportunities should be enhanced through the development of a “ridge to ridge” hiking trail, as well as the extension of other trails and the provision of public access to the lakeshore.

Land Acquisition: The Protection of Carpenter’s Falls

Located on the lower reaches of Bear Swamp Creek, Carpenter’s Falls is the highest waterfall within the Skaneateles Lake Watershed. The dramatic 90 foot waterfall has been a popular recreational area for generations. Below the falls, Bear Swamp Creek flows through a scenic, mile-long forested gorge before entering the lake at Appletree Point.



For more than a decade, the Finger Lakes Land Trust has been working with partners to secure this scenic natural area. Through three acquisitions and the support of an associated fundraising campaign, the Land Trust has been able to acquire a mile-long corridor extending from Carpenter’s Falls to the western shore of Skaneateles Lake.

Today, this natural area is under the shared management of the Land Trust and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. Visitors can enjoy walking through mature forests of hemlock, oak, and maple while peering down into Bear Swamp Creek’s rugged gorge.

Volunteers have helped restore the historic “Jug Path,” a trail that once linked a distillery adjacent to the falls with the shoreline. In addition, an interpretive kiosk provides information on the site’s natural and historic resources.

Land Trust executive director Andrew Zepp says, “Carpenter’s Falls is a special place and the community recognizes this. The project has truly been a grassroots effort with local residents contributing their time as well as their money to make it all possible.”

Implement a Systematic Effort to Conserve Productive Farmland and Other Open Space Parcels Through the Use of Conservation Easements and Other Means

Across the country, conservation easements have emerged as the tool of choice for protecting “working landscapes”—rural areas that are defined by a long tradition of agriculture and other land uses such as forestry.

Conservation easements are legal agreements that limit future development while typically allowing for traditional uses such as farming and forestry. Easement agreements are binding on future owners of the land and they may be held by non-profit land trusts or government conservation agencies.

Conservation easements are flexible documents that may be tailored to the specifics of the situation at hand. Easements may be either donated or sold. In New York, the state’s department of agriculture and markets is the primary source of funding for easement purchases. Those able to donate a conservation easement may benefit from both state and federal tax incentives provided that certain criteria are met.

Most farmers contacted through the Highlands study expressed strong interest in securing their land through the sale of a conservation easement. The implementation of a systematic easement purchase program would permanently protect the Highlands’ farms while providing the area’s farmers with much needed capital that could be plowed back into their operations.

A Conservation Easement Purchase: The Ireland Farm

Jeff and his brother Steve are fifth generation farmers in the town of Spafford. They farm approximately 1,200 acres of field crops - primarily corn, soy beans, oats, wheat, and hay. Two years ago they finalized their sale of a conservation easement on a significant portion of their farm through New York State’s farmland protection program. The easement is held by the American Farmland Trust.

The Irelands had been thinking about their legacy and the future of their farm. Without heirs interested in farming, they were concerned that the land would be developed and no longer farmed when they retire. They decided that the conservation easement program was a good way to be certain it would continue as a working farm. According to Jeff, “The generations in our family that want to farm are running out. We wanted to be sure this productive land is always farmed.”



Jeff and Steve Ireland

Conservation Success Story

Easements should also be utilized as a primary tool for the protection of natural areas within the Highlands. In select cases, however, direct acquisition of land should be pursued. Acquisition may be called for to provide for public recreational access where appropriate, and to protect particularly sensitive areas such as pristine wetlands.

Priorities for protection should include:

Productive Farmland—conservation easements should be acquired over the Highlands’ most productive and scenic farms to ensure continued agricultural productivity as well as the scenic views for which the area is well known. In general, larger parcels of farmland with high quality soils should be given the highest priority for protection efforts.

Undeveloped Lakeshore—undeveloped shoreline is perhaps the most threatened land resource to be found in the Finger Lakes Region. A number of undeveloped parcels may still be found within the Highlands, as well as parcels that could be developed further in the future. A combination of conservation easements and targeted acquisitions should be used to secure pristine lakeshore as well as steeply sloping hillsides overlooking the lake.

Southern Skaneateles Lake Forest—This 10,000-acre forest block already includes more than 3,000 acres of protected open space. Priority should be given to the protection of forest parcels that buffer core areas and are contiguous to existing protected lands.

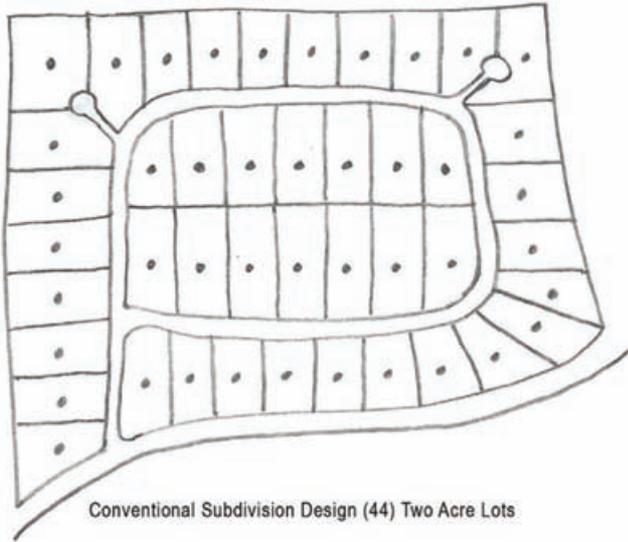
Bear Swamp Creek Corridor—highlighted as a priority for protection in New York State’s Open Space Plan, the wilds of Bear Swamp Creek and its associated wetlands are recognized for both their ecological and recreational values. The use of conservation easements and select acquisitions should continue as part of an effort to secure the entire creek corridor.

Scenic Overlooks—lands that make up the immediate “viewshed” associated with the one existing scenic overlook on State Route 41 should be a priority for protection through the use of conservation easements. In addition, easements should be used to secure viewshed lands associated with any other public overlooks to be developed in the future.

To pursue the protection of these lands, a combination of both public and private funding resources will be called for. It is anticipated that new funding mechanisms may need to be developed to supplement the state’s Environmental Protection Fund.



Strengthen Land Use Planning Efforts



Conventional Subdivision Design (44) Two Acre Lots



Conservation Subdivision Design (44) 3/4 Acre Lots & Protected Open Space

While the pace of change within the Highlands has been modest in recent years, communities must work together today to develop comprehensive plans and associated policies that will chart a clear path – both for growth and development, and for concurrent conservation efforts.

Elsewhere in the Finger Lakes Region, rural communities have recently been surprised by significant lakeshore development proposals that are far more intensive than any they'd seen before.

To prepare for this eventuality, Highlands communities should not only invest in comprehensive planning, but should also consider adopting best management practices for land use, including the systematic inventory of their natural resources, and the implementation of policies allowing for greater flexibility in housing density, and increased retention of open space.

Land use and subdivision regulations should be modified to incorporate a conservation analysis prior to development. This analysis would identify the location of any significant natural or cultural resources on a sketch plan, and be followed by a dialogue between the property owner (or developer) and the planning board about the conservation value of the lands proposed for development.

Another land use tool that should be considered, known as conservation subdivision design, allows for greater flexibility in dwelling density to enable setting aside larger areas of open space. Subdivision regulations as they exist may make the implementation of a conservation subdivision difficult due to minimum lot size requirements that result in much larger tracts of developed land. Current regulations may need to be modified to allow for the use of this tool.

These planning strategies will significantly advance the protection of open space resources within the Highlands. In addition, their adoption will result in far less open land being consumed by development - helping to preserve communities' rural character while minimizing money spent by municipalities on infrastructure and community services.

Develop a Scenic Byway Around Skaneateles Lake & Take Steps To Conserve Scenic Resources

There is little doubt that tourism in the Skaneateles Highlands has been important in the region and that it will continue to grow. In the words of Sue Dove, Executive Director of the Skaneateles Area Chamber of Commerce: “Natural beauty is a premium in this area and we are blessed to have an area of such stature as the Skaneateles Highlands. Tourism is a major part of our current local economy and will continue to be so. Conserving the cultural and natural beauty of the Highlands should be a top priority of everyone in the region to maintain economic stability and responsibly plan for growth of the tourism industry.”

The creation of a Scenic Byway utilizing State Routes 41 and 41A would benefit both tourists and communities in the Highlands. A Scenic Byway would help focus and inform tourism activities, bring stakeholders in the area together through a corridor planning process, enhance the recreational appeal, and contribute to the local economy.

A Scenic Byway is based upon themes associated with scenery, recreation, nature, history, and culture, all of which are important aspects of life in the Skaneateles Highlands. Planning would involve the efforts of local residents, business owners, and municipal officials to address issues concerning enhancement, conservation, and promotion of the Byway. The economic planning for tourism infrastructure is integral to the process and Scenic Byway designation can help with access to additional funding opportunities.

Joan Jurkowich of the Tompkins County Planning Department has been working on the nearby Cayuga Lake Scenic Byway project from the early stages of planning through its current status as a designated Byway. She notes that “The most important aspect of the project has been to see businesses and government officials from three counties working together to realize this project that benefits everyone.”

The development and maintenance of scenic overlooks would be an important part of a Scenic Byway plan. There is currently only one scenic overlook developed in the Skaneateles Highlands along State Route 41 in the Town of Scott. This turnout has a spectacular view and is heavily used. It offers an ideal opportunity to introduce visitors to the resources of the region, yet there is no interpretive signage and indeed, the view is becoming obstructed by trees. There are other opportunities for developing scenic overlooks and signage along the SR 41 and 41A corridors that should be explored more fully.

The Highlands are steeped in history. Efforts should be made to identify and conserve these historic resources. One good example is the picnic area and viewpoint at President Millard Fillmore’s birthplace which is maintained through the goodwill of the private landowner. Plans should be made for the future maintenance of this and other valuable historic sites.

In conjunction with the development of the Scenic Byway, local governments should carefully consider the adoption of development site design guidelines that maintain the integrity of scenic resources.



Enhance Compatible Recreational Opportunities



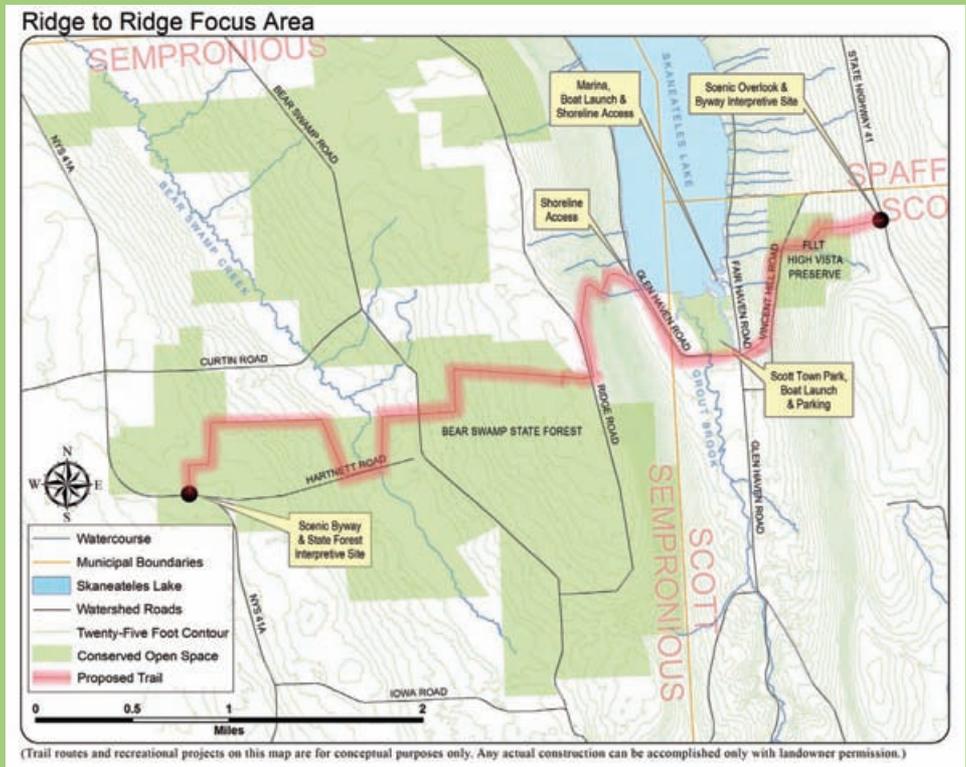
The expansion of recreational trails and the provision of access to the lake would benefit both residents and visitors to the Skaneateles Highlands. The creation of a six-mile long “Ridge to Ridge” hiking trail would link two sections of the proposed Scenic Byway with shoreline access sites and a variety of open space lands. In addition, extension of the Jug Path to the Village of New Hope would provide another linkage to the Byway. Taken together, these improvements would substantially expand the recreational amenities found within the Highlands.

The Ridge to Ridge Trail is a proposed six mile long trail that would extend from the western ridge to the eastern ridge, traversing the towns of Scott and Sempronius. This trail would extend from state forest lands bordering State Route 41A to the public scenic overlook on SR 41 and would link the extensive trail system of the Bear Swamp State Forest in the west with the Finger Lakes Land Trust’s High Vista Preserve in the east. Development of the trail would first require the permission of several private landowners.

The trail would head east through the state forest, down the steep hillside through property owned by the City of Syracuse, then across the flats at the south end of the lake, through the Town of Scott Park, then up the hillside to the east, joining the trail system of the High Vista Preserve before ending at the public scenic overlook.

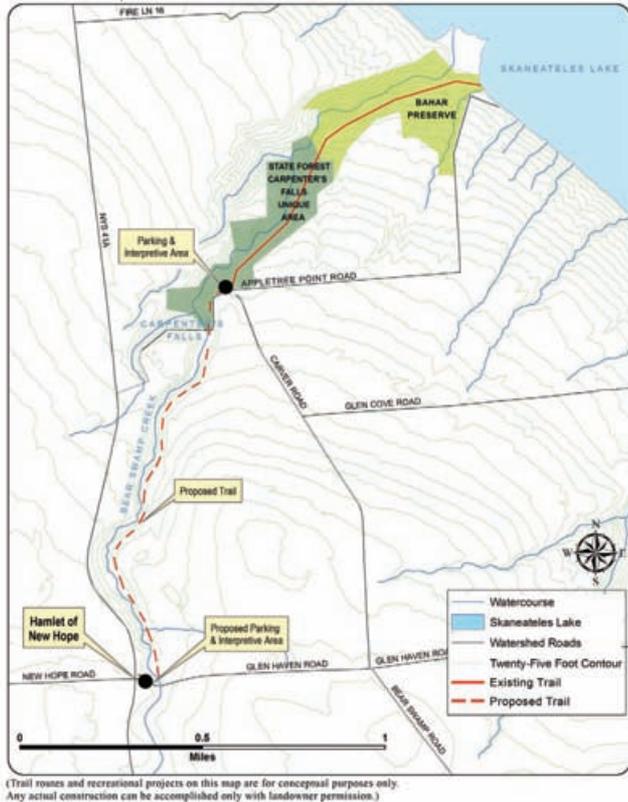
As part of this project, a parking area with interpretive kiosk would be developed on State Route 41A in the State Forest. A second kiosk would be installed at the existing scenic overlook on State Route 41. Both kiosks would provide information on the trail as well as associated recreational resources, an overview of the Skaneateles Highlands, and information about the Scenic Byway.

A highlight of the trail would be shoreline access that could be provided at the City of Syracuse parcel.



(Trail routes and recreational projects on this map are for conceptual purposes only. Any actual construction can be accomplished only with landowner permission.)

Bear Swamp Creek Focus Area



The Jug Path has been partially restored in the Finger Lakes Land Trust's Bahar Preserve and the State's Carpenter's Falls Unique Area. Improved maintenance of this trail and others in this heavily used area should be given priority for safety reasons. In addition, the potential for extending the trail one mile up Bear Swamp Creek to New Hope should be explored with private landowners. New Hope would serve as a good location for a trailhead because of its proximity to State Route 41A and the Scenic Byway.

Bear Swamp State Forest has about 13 miles of trails that are used for many different recreational purposes. The trail system should be enhanced through the installation of interpretive signage with maps as well as way finding signs on main highways to direct users to parking areas. Parking areas also would benefit from improved maintenance.

The Town of Scott Park at the south end of the Lake is adjacent to land owned by the NYSDEC that surrounds the mouth of Grout Brook. Footpaths could be built to allow access to and along the creek from the park. Additionally, trails could be constructed along the channel towards the south end of the lake.

Lake Access

Limited access to our lakes has been recognized as a concern across the Finger Lakes Region. This is true for Skaneateles as well. At present, public access to the lake is limited to four locations within the Highlands: boat launches at the Town of Scott Park and privately owned marinas in Niles and Scott, and a modest lakeside overlook at the Finger Lakes Land Trust's Bahar Nature Preserve. Swimming is not permitted at any of these locations.

For the future, continued public access for boat launching at the two marinas should be encouraged. In addition, the feasibility of providing for swimming and other recreational opportunities on lakefront land owned by the City of Syracuse within the Town of Sempronius should be explored.

It is essential that the local community and immediate neighbors to any lakefront property be involved in the development of any plans to provide for shoreline access.



