

# **CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION**

## **DOCUMENT ORGANIZATION**

The Town of LeRay Comprehensive Plan is organized into eight chapters. The contents and purpose of each of these chapters are summarized below.

### **CHAPTER I: *INTRODUCTION***

The Introduction provides an overview of the comprehensive planning project and its purpose and need. Key steps in the planning process are also detailed, including an overview of the public outreach process. Lastly, the introduction provides guidance on how the comprehensive plan should be used.

### **CHAPTER II: *INVENTORY AND ANALYSIS***

The Inventory & Analysis describes existing conditions and trends in the Town of LeRay across a variety of subject areas. The information contained in the Inventory & Analysis helped to establish town priorities and also to serve as the foundation for plan recommendations.

### **CHAPTER III: *VISION STATEMENT***

The Town Vision Statement was derived from public input and from information gathered in the Inventory & Analysis phase of the project. The Vision Statement establishes a baseline and foundation for this plan and the recommendations it sets forth, as well a benchmark for future decision making.

### **CHAPTER IV: *TOWN CHARACTER AREAS***

The Town of LeRay consists of a diverse array of landscapes and settings. Midway through the planning process, these diverse areas of town coalesced into distinct “Character Areas” – areas of the town that share unique qualities and opportunities. For each Character Area, a vision statement, goals, strategies and land use recommendations have been developed. The Character Areas are meant to be used as a guide to future decision-making and actions in the

town. As such, they are not parcel specific, but indicate approximate areas within the town that possess common existing and future desired characteristics. The exact boundaries of the character areas are not as important as their general locations and extent relative to one another.

## **CHAPTER V: GREEN PLANNING**

In addition to land use and town policies associated with specific character areas, one topic area emerged in the planning process that cuts across character areas - Green Planning. The concept of Green Planning is being embraced by more and more communities at the local level as concerns about the environment and climate change mount. People around the world, including the residents of LeRay, increasingly realize that we are all connected as residents of one planet and that the impacts of local communities can have a direct impact on the collective quality-of-life and environment across political and cultural boundaries. Moreover, people are increasingly aware of the connection between Green Planning concepts and the fiscal health and quality of life of the community.

## **CHAPTER VI: TOWN-WIDE PRINCIPLES**

Certain goals and strategies cut across Character Areas and apply to the town as a whole. These Town-Wide principles, set forth in Chapter VI, should be used to guide future decisions and actions in every area of town.

## **CHAPTER VII: STRATEGIC PLAN**

The Strategic Action Plan distills the plan's recommendations into a set of priority actions. The priority actions set forth specific programs and procedures that would allow the town to achieve its goals and vision. In many cases, funding sources and grant programs are identified. The Strategic Action Plan should be viewed as a range of possible actions that town may wish to take in the future. To this end, the Strategic Action Plan has been written with this flexibility in mind. Each action item may be implemented in full, or in smaller steps. Moreover, "separate" action items may be recombined and undertaken together. In the end, flexibility and common sense should dictate the details of how and when such actions are implemented, provided that they remain true to the overarching goal of the action item and the themes of this plan.

**CHAPTER VIII: CONCLUSION**

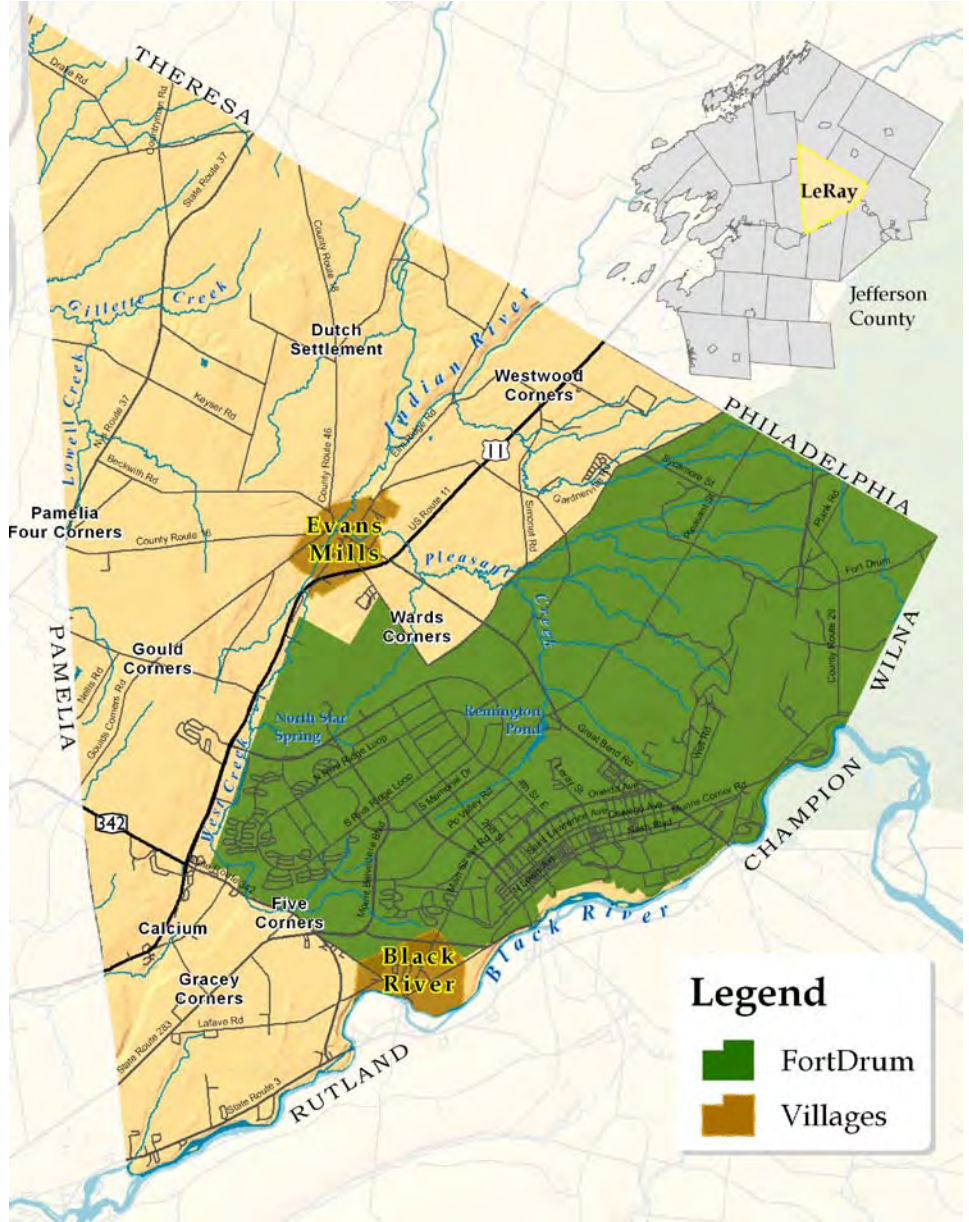
**CHAPTER IX: DGEIS**

The Town of LeRay Comprehensive Plan was reviewed and adopted in conformance with New York State Town Law and the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA), including the preparation of a Draft Generic Environmental Impact Statement (DGEIS). According to *The SEQRA Handbook*, which is published by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC), “a generic EIS is a type of EIS that is more general than a site-specific EIS and typically is used to consider broad-based actions ...the generic EIS can examine the environmental effects of programs or plans that have wide application or restrict the range of future alternative policies such as agency regulations or permit programs, master plans, or resource management plans”.

To this end, a single document combining both the analysis required by SEQRA and the Town of LeRay Comprehensive Plan was created since a comprehensive plan, by its very nature, takes a comprehensive look at the environment and setting of a community and evaluates alternatives. Chapter VIII contains additional analysis, in addition to what is found in the plan itself, on specific topic areas required by SEQRA.

## TOWN OVERVIEW

Located near the center of Jefferson County, the Town of LeRay is uniquely situated between four significant regions of New York State: the Tug Hill Region to the south; the Adirondacks to the east; the St. Lawrence Region to the north; and the Great Lakes Region to the west. Another unique aspect of LeRay is that nearly 40% of the town's land is occupied by Fort Drum – home of the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division and approximately 17,000 military personnel. The Town of LeRay also contains two villages, Evans Mills and Black River, as well as several hamlets, the largest of which is Calcium.



The town's proximity to both the City of Watertown and a growing Fort Drum has led to significant

commercial and residential growth in LeRay in recent years, particularly along US Route 11. This growth has provided new settings for residents in which to live and do business. Largely outside of these growth areas, with the exception of Calcium, are the town's villages and hamlets, which help to anchor the town with their historic and unique settings. With respect to the natural landscape, the Indian and Black Rivers are defining elements, enriching the town

## TOWN OF LERAY – COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

with beauty, wildlife habitat, and a host of recreational opportunities. The town's high quality soils continue to make LeRay an attractive setting for farms, despite challenges posed by town growth. All of these qualities, and more, contribute to LeRay's high quality of life. High quality schools, a "small town atmosphere," and the scenic qualities of a rural landscape, in particular, are characteristics of life in LeRay that residents have said they cherish.

Over the last several decades, starting with the activation of the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division in 1985 and continuing with the latest Fort Drum expansion associated with the Global War on Terrorism, the Town of LeRay has undergone a change from a largely rural, "small town" community, dominated by family farms, to a local commercial and residential hub centered on activities at Fort Drum. The most current and on-going fort expansion has brought many benefits to the town including new jobs and shopping choices, as well as even stronger ties between the fort and the Town of LeRay. For instance, Fort personnel and their families increasingly live and work in the town; their children attend local schools; and with the army's "force stabilization" policy, Fort personnel and their families will be assigned to Fort Drum for longer periods of time than in the past, better enabling them to put down roots in the community. Thus, while the growth of the Fort has posed a number of challenges for the town, as described below and elsewhere in this plan, the majority of people living in LeRay – both long-term residents and newer arrivals -- take pride in LeRay's role as a key support community to Fort Drum. As noted above, this growth has largely focused on the Route 11 corridor in LeRay, closest to Fort gates. Realizing the full benefits of this growth and ensuring that it makes a positive contribution to the town's quality of life for many years to come, is a major theme of this plan.

While some areas of the town have "boomed," the town's villages and hamlets (with the exception of the Hamlet of Calcium) have struggled. Despite some notable projects, such as public libraries in Evans Mills and Black River, and ongoing upgrades to housing stock and businesses undertaken by individuals, both villages have struggled to keep their downtowns active and filled in recent years. While the population of the Town of LeRay has grown substantially, village population has remained flat or declined. This plan seeks to address this imbalance and establish ways that the town and villages can partner to ensure that traditional village and hamlet centers play a relevant and vital role in the town's future.

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Likewise, the town's agricultural areas have also increasingly struggled in recent years, due to a complex set of factors, including the evolving nature of the agriculture industry and local, state, and national public policy. Development pressures, however, are also clearly impacting the town's remaining farmers. In some cases, farm owners have sold portions of their properties in a piecemeal manner in order to either pay taxes or to slowly divest themselves from farming. For many farmers, conflicts between farming and other land uses, particularly residential, have made farming in the town increasingly difficult, to the point that few members of the next generation choose to continue farming. Town residents, however, want to see the town's rural landscape preserved and have expressed support for town policies that strengthen its agricultural base.

As the town has grown and matured, so too has its transportation network, as recently completed improvements to Route 11 will testify. As the town continues to grow, attention to other transportation modes – such as walking and bicycling -- will need to be considered as part of the town's "transportation portfolio." Public transit service will also become more feasible and useful as population, shopping, and employment bases concentrate in the town. Looking ahead, the town's comprehensive plan and its land use vision can provide a context for making decisions with respect to transportation improvements and investments.

With an increasing population, residents have recognized a need for more recreational facilities in the town, particularly those geared towards the town's children and teens. This plan sets forth recommendations for providing such facilities in close proximity to high growth areas in the town. Such facilities not only provide places to recreate, but can anchor the town's residential neighborhoods and create a sense of community. In addition to new facilities, residents want to build on existing, highly popular facilities, such as the DANC/Calcium Trail.

Lastly, the cost-of-living for LeRay residents has increased in recent years. Town residents have cited housing affordability as an area of particular concern. Housing costs, while subject to national market forces and trends, are also influenced at the local level by the wages and benefits paid by Fort Drum to both military and civilian employees, particularly the Basic Housing Allowance for soldiers and their dependants; as well as general market pressures

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related to Fort growth and expansion. A recently completed housing study commissioned by the Fort Drum Regional Liaison Organization (FDRLO) concluded area rents have increased at significantly higher rates compared to other communities in Upstate New York.<sup>1</sup> This plan looks at ways in which the town can ensure that there are a wide range of housing options for all town residents moving forward.

**While town residents recognize that recent growth has posed challenges, they equally recognize that growth presents many exciting opportunities. The key goal of this project and this plan is to protect and build upon the special qualities of LeRay, while ensuring that the town realizes the positive benefits of growth and change. Ultimately, this plan is about laying a foundation today for a town of tomorrow of which all can be proud.**



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<sup>1</sup> “Housing Analysis – Fort Drum & the Watertown Market: Watertown, Jefferson County, Spring 2008,” prepared by GAR Associates, Inc., Page 50.

## PROJECT BACKGROUND

### THE POWER OF A PLAN

A comprehensive plan functions at many levels. At its broadest level, it sets forth a shared vision for the future of the community. More specifically, the plan identifies qualities and aspects of the town that residents want to see protected and/or strengthened, while

#### *WHAT IS A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN?*

- A “Visioning Document”
- Identifies Issues and Opportunities
- Overall Vision and Detailed Vision
- A Tool for Meeting Change Proactively

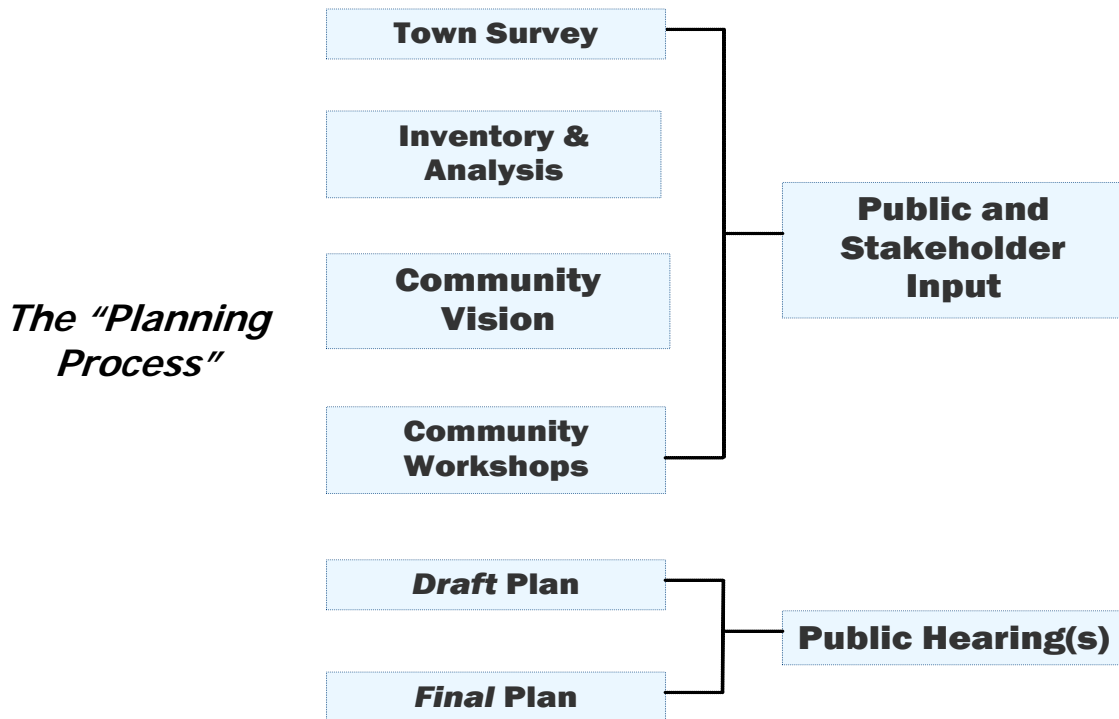
identifying new directions and opportunities, in order to meet change proactively. Overall, the primary purpose of the plan is to establish broad community consensus that will serve to guide future decision-making. Town staff, the public, and public and private entities will all benefit from a clear vision for the town’s future. Having a plan in place can also qualify the town for public dollars and support to implement town projects and goals.

As part of this planning project, the community has identified town “Character Areas” – areas of the town that possess unique qualities, challenges and opportunities that set them apart from other areas of town. For these areas, working within the framework of the overall vision for the town, the plan sets forth goals, strategies and guiding principals, as well as conceptual plans and projects that serve to illustrate them. The plan also contains town-wide goals and strategies that are relevant to all areas of town. The strength of the plan lies in its mixture of broad, overarching concepts and goals, as well as more detailed concepts that together can guide future decision making. Flexibility is also an important component of this plan, so that future decision makers and action takers can adapt to on-the-ground opportunities as they may arise and develop new and creative ideas to seize them, while staying true to the guiding principals of the plan.

In the end, the plan’s success will be reflected in tangible outcomes that town residents can see and experience. By establishing a clear vision with this plan, the Town of LeRay will be prepared to meet change and proactively shape the future of the town for years to come.

## THE PLANNING PROCESS

The Town of LeRay Comprehensive Plan is a collaborative effort of local residents and stakeholders; local and area government officials and staff; community business people; and civic groups and organizations. To this end, a Comprehensive Plan Committee representing a range of viewpoints and experiences was assembled early on in the process to guide the consultant during the development of the plan and to ensure that the project responded to the diverse needs of the community. Committee members included members of the local business community, an organic farmer, a Fort Drum spouse, and many others. Because the comprehensive plan is a community document, public input is a critical element of the planning process, as critical as the plan document itself. Ensuring public support and understanding of the plan's ideas helps to ensure that they will be implemented after the plan is adopted. The relationship between the public outreach process and the development of plan ideas and concepts contained in the comprehensive plan is illustrated in the diagram below. Essentially, each phase of the planning process was informed by public input. Public input, in turn, helped to shape plan ideas and new ideas for public outreach. For instance, results from the town survey and the first public workshop demonstrated strong community support for maintaining the town's rural landscape and helping the town's farmers to keep farming and the need for an Agricultural Focus Group meeting. Other town priorities that emerged directly from the public



process include, but are not limited to, the need for more and expanded recreational facilities in town, the desire that growth and development in the town be attractive and of a high quality nature; and concerns about the rising cost of living, particularly with respect to housing. The individual components of the public outreach/input process for the Town of LeRay Comprehensive Plan are described in more detail below.

## **TOWN SURVEY**

In May of 2007, 1,407 surveys were mailed to single-family and two-family residences in the Town of LeRay and the Villages of Evans Mills and Black River, to solicit opinions on a variety of town issues in anticipation of embarking on the comprehensive planning process. By July of 2007, approximately 515 surveys were returned for a response rate of 37%. Respondents to the survey indicated that the three issues of greatest concern to the town's residents are the property tax burden in LeRay, local jobs and economic opportunities, and the preservation of open space in the town. The results of the survey were an important first step in identifying what issues are most important to the residents of LeRay. These results are included in Appendix A of this plan.

## **COMPREHENSIVE PLAN COMMITTEE MEETINGS**

In the summer of 2007, the town sought the assistance of Behan Planning and Design, a planning consulting firm, and Erdman Anthony, an engineering firm with expertise in transportation planning, to work with the Comprehensive Plan Committee and the community to create a comprehensive plan for LeRay. The committee and consultants met on an almost monthly basis during the course of the project to advance plan ideas and to develop the plan. Throughout this process, the Comprehensive Plan Committee served as an interface between the consultant and the town at large, to ensure that plan ideas and concepts responded to the town's unique characteristics, needs, and ambitions.

**PUBLIC MEETINGS**

The centerpiece of the public outreach effort consisted of three workshops, each of which included one or more of the following elements: interactive activities; short break-out discussions by topic area; and a final summary and presentation by participants. A variety of methods were used to advertise the meetings and encourage public involvement, including posters, mailings, radio spots, press releases and word of mouth. A project website linked to through the municipal website of the Town of LeRay was maintained throughout the course of the project to keep the public informed of the project's progress. Each public meeting served to communicate ideas, solicit input and advance plan concepts. The results of each meeting informed the next step of the planning project. A summary of the public workshops is included in Appendix B. This process is illustrated conceptually below:

**Top 3 Town Strengths Identified at Public Workshop #1**

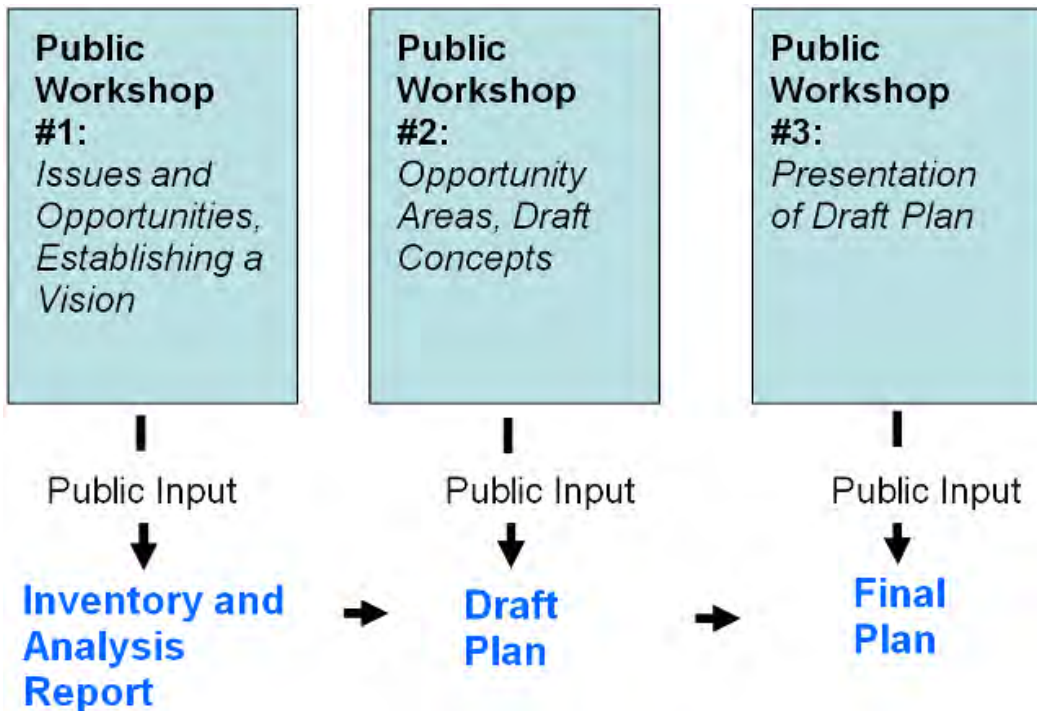


- Proximity to Fort Drum
- Small Town Atmosphere
- Relatively Low Taxes

**Top 3 Town Weaknesses Identified at Public Workshop #1**



- High Housing Costs
- Lack of Town Recreational Amenities
- Relatively High Taxes



## **AGRICULTURAL FOCUS GROUP MEETING**

Midway through the planning process, as the rural character of LeRay and the desire of town residents to support agriculture emerged as major issues; an Agricultural Focus Group meeting was conducted at the town hall to get farmers and agricultural property owners in the town around a table talking about their own perspectives and experiences. Agricultural stakeholders



A “breakout” group discusses plan concepts at the April 2008 public workshop.

and farmers present at the meeting voiced concerns about the future of agriculture in the town as development pressures and land use conflicts between farming and residential uses make farming increasingly difficult. Stakeholders felt that a goal for any plan involving agriculture in LeRay should protect the northern portions of LeRay for agricultural uses. Increased traffic on town

roads and excessive travel speeds on many roadways were cited as especially troublesome, due to the conflict between slower speed farm traffic and highway traffic. Farm owners also expressed interest in exploring a Purchase of Development Rights program for LeRay based and cited examples of successful efforts in other areas of the country. Overall, agricultural stakeholders and farmers felt that the town’s future should continue to include agriculture, and that residents should be aware of LeRay’s status as a “Right to Farm” community.