

# Planning For an Age Friendly Tompkins County

## Looking Beyond Land Use

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Student Report: Grace McCartney, Lin Khant Oo, Robyn Wardell  
Cornell University  
Professor Mildred E. Warner and Dr. Xue Zhang

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## **PROJECT ORIGINS**

Our research team collaborated with a variety of partners, each of which plays their own role in making our County more age friendly. In 2015, The Tompkins County Office for the Aging (COFA) led successful efforts to join AARP’s Network of Age-friendly Communities. In 2019, Tompkins County was one of three counties in New York to receive a grant from the Health Foundation of Western New York to develop the Age Friendly Center for Excellence. This initiative is a partnership amongst COFA, Cornell University, local health organizations and municipalities.

## **WHY AGE FRIENDLY?**

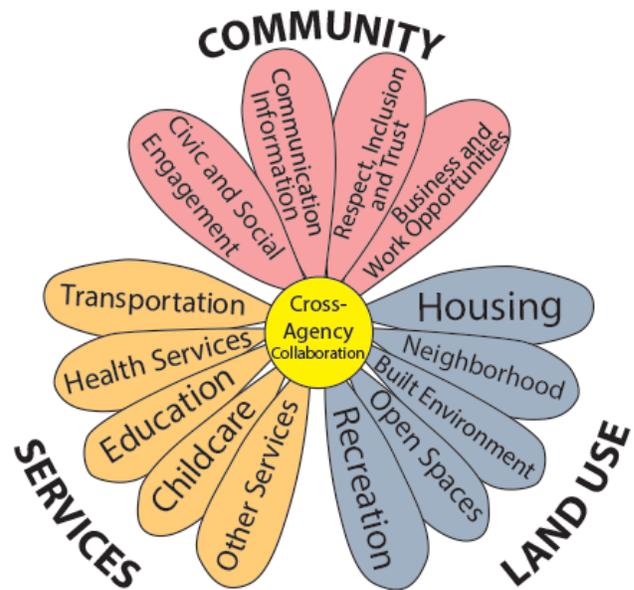
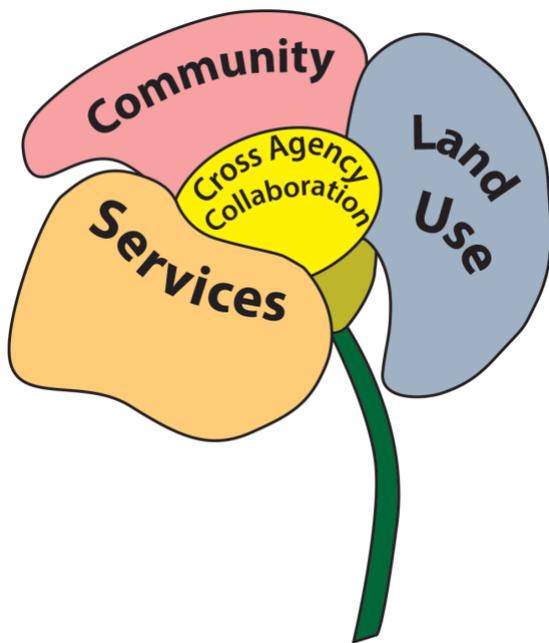
Like many other counties in the United States, the population in Tompkins County has been slowly aging over the last few decades. The county has seen a drop in total percentage of children. Part of these trends come from overall growth that the county has been experiencing. However, this growth is historically more concentrated outside the center of the county, in Towns neighboring Ithaca. This means people of all ages are distanced from the services and convenience of the city.

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**METHODOLOGY**

First we established a means by which to compare each municipality in the county uniformly. We created the flower framework, pictured below, by synthesizing characteristics for an age-friendly community published by AARP, WHO, UNICEF and the Tompkins County Office for the Aging. After the framework was approved by the Tompkins County Age Friendly Center for Excellence, step two of the process began. We applied it to every comprehensive plan in Tompkins County by reading the plans and identifying elements that represented a petal of the flower. We looked at all municipalities including: cities, villages, towns, and the county. This process resulted in 12 analyses. However, this level of review felt inadequate because adoption dates of comprehensive plans ranged from 2005-2015. In order to flesh out our understanding of each community we talked to the people who live and work there. This third step of the project fleshed out our understanding of the reality of age-friendly assets and helped us identify five prominent topics to guide the Tompkins County Age Friendly Center for Excellence.





# Urban, Nodal, and Rural Forms

## STAFFING AND SCHOOL DISTRICTS POSE UNIQUE CHALLENGES

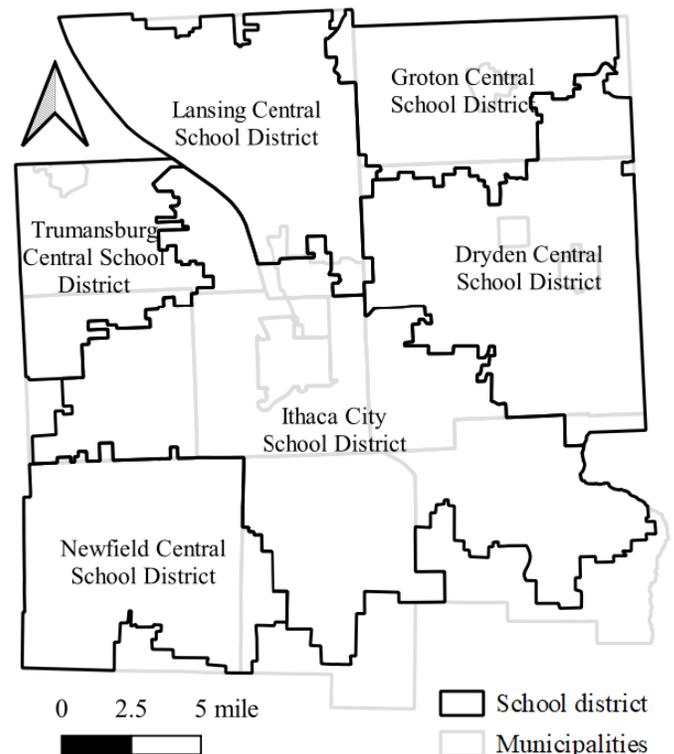
Research into age-friendly planning has focused more on urban spaces than rural areas. Across the various municipalities that we analyzed, we found that what may work in an urban setting doesn't necessarily translate to rural settings. Furthermore, demographic trends indicate increasing presence of older adults, especially in rural areas. Addressing the different contexts is crucial for municipalities to foster an age-friendly community.

### Staffing and Volunteerism

Municipality staff often function as a convener or supporter of programs that deliver services, rather than creating and running them themselves. This means that rural municipalities must rely heavily on local volunteers. In the Town of Caroline, for example, volunteers run emergency food distribution programs, the local emergency medical services and the fire department. While volunteers serve essential and important functions in the Town, it is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit and retain volunteers for these roles. Even though service delivery has an outsized importance in rural places, the lack of paid staff and municipally sponsored programs to deliver them put these places at a disadvantage.

### School Districts

The presence of school districts plays a particularly important role. In the map above, we see that town boundaries don't always line up well with school district boundaries. We highlight Danby and Enfield, which have three different school districts serving different portions of the town. Funding and administration for local government recreational programming is often delineated at the town level. In towns like Danby and Enfield, where most of the town falls under the Ithaca City School District (ICSD), it is more difficult to recruit students from the Town. In addition, students in ICSD schools may have friends from other towns who can't participate in the youth programs. Where school districts and towns share common boundaries, the school forms part of the town's identity, as is the case in Newfield. Towns that have their own school districts can closely integrate the school and town efforts. We saw this in the Town of Ulysses and the Trumansburg School District where the Town Board met regularly and coordinated with both the Village of Trumansburg and the school district. Having one primary school district that covers most of the Town's population encourages cross-agency collaboration.





# Role of Municipalities and Planning

## ASSESSING WHAT CAN BE DONE AT THE MUNICIPAL LEVEL

Municipalities play important roles in how the land use challenges surrounding age-friendly are addressed. Planners have a unique opportunity to create more equitable built environments and they can create age-friendly communities by integrating services and collaborating with community organizations to address age-friendly concerns.

### Comprehensive Plans

Many of the comprehensive plans in Tompkins County identified maintaining character, through housing, transportation, and land use patterns, as a priority. Managing land use was a prominent priority for communities, one that occasionally coexisted with a resistance for zoning. Lansing, Dryden and Ulysses have villages and several other towns have dense centers like unincorporated hamlets. These serve as centers for stores and schools, but overtime have been hollowed out as some market and government services have centralized in Ithaca. In many instances, there is little ability to control the type of development in hamlets and villages due to shifts in economic realities.

Comprehensive plans are used by municipalities to outline a vision for their community and to set long-term planning goals. In our review of the plans in Tompkins County, we found that most plans are focused on land use and characteristics of the built environment. As a result, goals related to service provision and community building are often left out. Plans are focused on land use within each municipality. By contrast, services are sometimes collaborative across municipal lines. Services are usually state or county funded programs, often with local nonprofits, and coordinated planning occurs in county wide service plans (health, youth services, aging, etc.). The center of our flower framework is cross agency collaboration. This provides the groundwork for continued collaboration among service and planning agencies.

### Connective Infrastructure

Transportation was addressed in all the comprehensive plans we reviewed. Transportation can be assessed as both a service and a land use matter. Public transit, like the TCAT system, is a service offered by the county whereas, sidewalks and park and rides fall into the land use arena. Transportation has a strong age-friendly emphasis because special attention needs to be given to people too young and too old to drive. In Cayuga Heights, for example, the community has come together to improve pedestrian infrastructure so that students have safe routes to walk to school. One type of public transit infrastructure Towns can contribute to at the municipal level is building park-and-rides to make TCAT more accessible. Sidewalk connectivity is important within hamlets and villages to make them more walkable. For example, a collaboration between the Town of Ulysses and Village of Trumansburg led to expanding their sidewalk network. The Town is focused on the “last mile” and has added bike racks at TCAT stops and suggested new locations for park-and-rides.



# Service Delivery

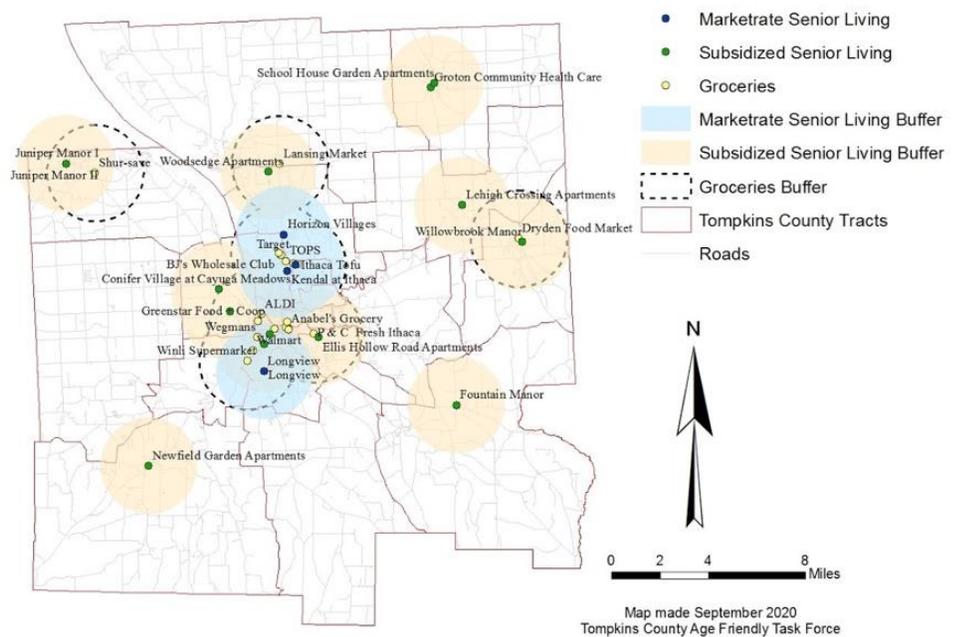
## AT THE CORE OF PLANNING LIES ACCESS TO SERVICES

Land use and urban design are some of the most important tools for age friendly planning in densely populated areas. However, in rural areas the physical realities of having a more dispersed population mean that one’s physical access to community assets and resources will be more limited than their urban counterparts. Thus, taking an age friendly planning approach in rural areas requires decision makers to put a greater emphasis on service provision and developing a strong sense of community. Services build the connective tissue of rural places, connecting people with one another and ensuring they have access to what they need in order to live and thrive.

### Walkability

Access to services varies widely across Tompkins County, and is affected by physical access, household income and market realities. In denser community centers like the City of Ithaca or the Village of Lansing, residents are more likely to be able to walk, bike or have access to reliable and consistent public transportation in order to get to the doctor or buy groceries. In rural areas, it is rare to be within walking distance of such community resources. In addition, using public transportation might be challenging due to less frequent schedules, proximity to the nearest bus stop, and lack of infrastructure to support walking and biking. So, there are differences in access to services depending on the physical environment. This becomes apparent when looking at grocery store accessibility in the county. The map above shows the intersections of senior living locations and grocery stores. In several instances, the senior living centers are without any overlap from the grocery store buffer zone.

Senior Living and Groceries Buffer Accessibility



### Domino Effect

We found that access to one service can have a domino effect onto others. For example, in less populated areas where cell service is spotty and internet access is hard to find, it may be hard for an individual to access information. This may make it difficult to keep track of the bus schedule, which they need to know in order to get into town for doctor’s appointments and grocery shopping. Transportation access is particularly important for rural residents and residents of subsidized senior housing, to be able to access services. The map above gives a 2 mile buffer around senior living and show that while the more urban based market rate housing has access to groceries and pharmacies, the subsidizes senior housing does not. While groceries and pharmacies

may have been accessible when the housing was built, these services have left many rural communities over time, creating new challenges for service access.



## Resilience and COVID-19

### CREATING SOLUTIONS AND BREAKING DOWN SILOS

The COVID-19 pandemic created new and difficult challenges for all communities. All of our interviews involved some discussion of the pandemic. Whether the discussion was related to youth programming, walking trails or libraries, every individual and institution had to adjust. The interruption of daily life left only some elements of normalcy standing and revealed the strongest parts of each community.

### Nutritional Assistance

The Enfield community came together to offer supplemental food to seniors. Over 100 shoppers over the age of 65 went each week to get food supplies. The food pantry managed to double its capacity during the pandemic to make sure it had capacity for community members with new needs. The pantry also offers nutritional information to support community members with knowledge and planning skills, in addition to the food they receive. The efforts to combat food insecurity were a County wide coordinated effort that broke down many preexisting bureaucratic and organizational barriers. Our colleague Jeremy Xu studied the response to food provision during the pandemic with a focus on the collaborations that COFA, Foodnet Meals on Wheels, Child Development Council, Way2Go, and Gadabout were able to construct. See his report here:

Xu, Jeremy, 2020. "[Multiagency Response To Food Insecurity During The Covid-19 Pandemic](http://cms.mildredwarner.org/p/315)", Best Practices Report. Tompkins County Age Friendly Center for Excellence, Cornell University Dept of City and Reg, Planning. <http://cms.mildredwarner.org/p/315>

### Youth Programming

In Danby, the normal routine of youth programming was interrupted but not ended, thanks to the creative thinking of the Youth Program Coordinator and participants in the program. The shift away from focus on in-person school and elimination of other programs brought in a new group of youth to the program. They put together an outdoor Halloween event, with careful planning for limiting size and minimizing close contact. Communities that were able to overcome troubling impacts of the pandemic did so because they had strong foundations of volunteerism, collaboration and established networks. The well-established volunteerism in Enfield made it possible for capacity to be increased during the crisis, and the engagement with youth in Danby allowed programming to continue despite restrictions. These facets are all critical parts of age friendly communities, and show that an age-friendly community is a resilient one.

### Volunteerism

As mentioned in the section on Urban, Nodal, and Rural Forms, rural municipalities often have limited staff. In the wake of the pandemic this social service infrastructure was tested. Luckily a strong foundation was there for support. Rural municipalities often function as a convener or supporter of programs that deliver services, rather than creating and running them themselves. This means that rural municipalities must rely heavily on local volunteers. In rural communities volunteers run emergency food distribution programs, the local emergency medical services, and fire departments. While volunteers serve essential and important functions, it is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit and retain volunteers for these roles. Even though service delivery has an outsized

importance in rural places, the lack of paid staff and municipally-sponsored programs put these places at a disadvantage.



# Cross Agency Collaboration

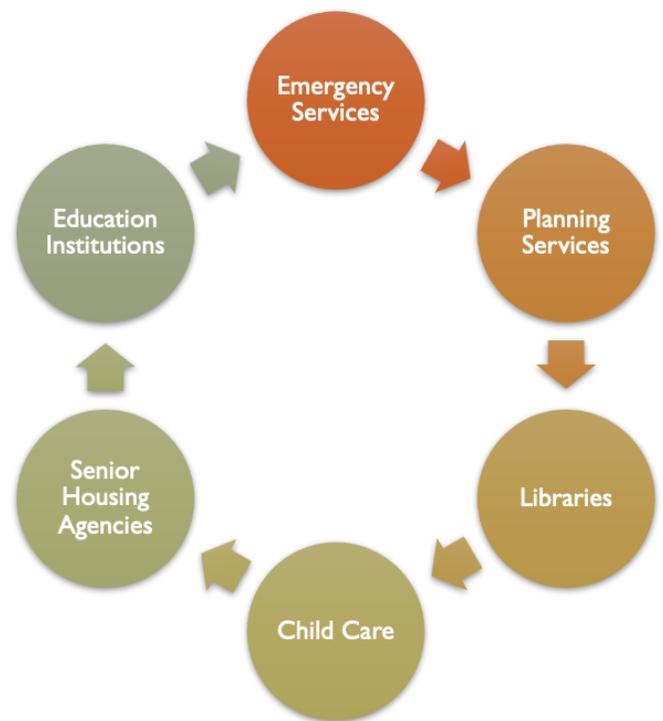
## THE KEY TO SUCCESS

Cross-agency collaboration sits at the center of our flower framework. We found that while there are some common pitfalls, municipalities that value cross-agency collaboration are often more able to be innovative and nimble in their age friendly planning initiatives.

### Silos

There are some common silos that can diminish age friendly efforts. First, there are varying levels of collaboration and communication across different levels of government. From county to towns, to villages and hamlets, there are different scales of government and intersecting notions of identity and responsibilities among them. There are also silos between youth and senior services. While youth and seniors often have overlapping needs and benefit from interacting with one another, education, care and engagement programs are often divided between youth and older people.

One specific facet of overcoming silos that came up, especially in our interviews, was the role of secular community organizations like school districts, fire departments and libraries. They often served as a hub for information and a space for various community programming. From our interview with the Finger Lakes Library system, we found that libraries connect across silos because they are ‘yes’ organizations. Despite limited resources, libraries are happy to engage and link different community programs. Fire departments can serve as space for community events and school districts act as a hub for youth programming and often work with the larger community.



### Urban vs Rural Concentration

As with all other parts of the flower framework, we noticed a distinction between cross agency collaboration in rural towns and the City of Ithaca. In an interview with the Town of Caroline, one of the attendees responded to a question about silos in the Town’s work by saying, “In a rural community, what’s a silo?” She knew they held silage, but in terms of working with others, that’s just an assumed aspect of working with a small staff and small population. There is a collaborative, all hands-on deck mentality for most projects that does not leave room for specializing.



## Recommendations

These recommendations came together after evaluating the conditions described above. Some are more aspirational than others, though they are all attainable. We hope these provide a starting point for conversation about next steps toward a more age friendly Tompkins County. To start, this list has been adopted into the Age Friendly Ithaca and Tompkins County Action Plan 2022.

### **1. Build and maintain a task force to sustain momentum and collaboration**

- a. The task force should include social service agencies (for children and seniors), economic development, planning, local communities and libraries to encourage collaboration to promote all aspects of age-friendly communities.
- b. Develop a governance and leadership model that ensures that all members are empowered to contribute.

### **2. Build on the successes that emerged from the County's COVID response efforts**

- a. Tompkins County's COVID response included innovations in the delivery of goods and services, finance and information-sharing. These collaborative efforts built community resilience that we should work to sustain after the pandemic is over.

### **3. Recognize the importance of volunteerism and community engagement**

- a. Recognize the crucial role of citizen planners and volunteers in town level planning efforts.
- b. Support informal networks and services.
- c. Expand internet connectivity improvement efforts to increase communication, information sharing and outreach, especially for rural communities.

### **4. Expand and ensure access to services regardless of location.**

- a. Encourage both market and government providers to expand service access, especially delivery systems for groceries and drugs to rural households. This could be a role for economic development.
- b. Expand coordination of decentralized service delivery, as the County Youth Bureau and Libraries do now, so that a wider range of services is available to seniors and children across the county.

### **5. Augment nodal development by incorporating services and community into land use**

- a. Recognize the limits of nodal development for rural age-friendly. A focus on physical planning is not enough. County and town-level planning needs to recognize the importance of services as they pertain to childcare and aging in in place.
- b. Create training and opportunities for cross community learning on age friendly practices for planning board members