

Susquehanna River Valley Economic Development Strategic Plan Executive Summary

The Susquehanna River Valley Economic Development Strategic Plan (SRVEDSP) represents Phase II of the project “Economic Development Strategic Plan for the Tri-Town Area and Comprehensive Action Plans for the Tri-Town Communities” a project initiated by the TCA Vision 21 Formatting Committee. Phase I of the project consisted of the development of Comprehensive Action Plans for the Town of Bainbridge, Village of Bainbridge, Town of Sidney, Village of Sidney, and the Town of Unadilla.¹ The Center for Economic & Community Development at SUNY College at Oneonta and Carlson Associates, Inc. were contracted to complete both phases of the project.

In the course of developing the Tri-Town Area Regional Economic Development Strategic Plan, the project consultants determined that a more appropriate name for the region of study was warranted. After careful consideration of geographic and historic traits of the region, it was concluded that the name “Susquehanna River Valley” captures the essence of each of the six communities and would be a unique identifier for the region. This new name provides numerous opportunities to promote the region for economic development, marketing, and tourism purposes, as well as to build a sense of community and collaboration among the six municipalities in the Susquehanna River Valley.

The Comprehensive Action Plans that have been developed for the communities that comprise the Susquehanna River Valley clearly reveal that these communities share a number of present challenges and future opportunities. These common factors are not simply economic in nature, but include community development and quality of life as well. In addition, the future nature of municipal government and community leadership are primary factors – ones that will determine the extent to which the Comprehensive Action Plans and regional strategic plan are implemented. As a result, this study focuses on the need for future change to enhance the economy, quality of life, and the nature of government operations. Long-term collaborative efforts to invest in improving these three areas are essential if the Susquehanna River Valley is to experience economic revitalization in the decades to come.

The SRVEDSP incorporates goals and strategies that are intended to result in new organizations, innovative programs, and bold leadership. The proposed SRVEDSP is designed to help the residents of the Susquehanna River Valley move forward to achieve the following regional vision:

¹ The Village of Unadilla contracted separately for a Comprehensive Plan only one year prior to this project, therefore the Village was not included in this contract.

Susquehanna River Valley Vision Statement

The vision for the Susquehanna River Valley is to create innovative, collaborative public/public and public/private partnerships for the purpose of revitalizing the economic and quality of life conditions for all residents.

Community leaders and residents are committed to creating a vibrant, small business economy, rediscovering the potential for agricultural development, maintaining access to excellent healthcare facilities, enhancing recreational facilities and arts programs, and establishing government that is cost effective and simple in structure and process. As this vision is achieved, it will spur investment in the economy and stimulate population growth by attracting and retaining retirees, young families, small business owners, and entrepreneurs to the region.

Ultimately, it must be recognized that there is no “quick fix” to the economic and quality of life challenges facing the Susquehanna River Valley. Certainly, the conditions of concern that exist in the region today emerged over a number of decades, but they can be confronted and reversed. What will it take to do this? At the least, it will take hard work by many concerned leaders and citizens. Beyond this it will require a renewed sense of purpose, commitment to “stay on course,” and willingness to use planning as a powerful tool for positive change.

Based on an assessment of information compiled from the Comprehensive Action Plans, Demographic Analysis, Community Surveys, Merchant Surveys, interviews with government, business and community leaders, and a general assessment of the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats facing the Susquehanna River Valley, a number of goals are recommended as the basis of the SRVEDSP. The goals are summarized below in terms of three broad categories including Economic Development, Community Development, and Revitalizing Government. The listing of these goals is not in order of priority, but is simply grouped according to the three categories. TCA Vision 21 will work closely with municipal governments and community leaders to prioritize and implement these goals.

Economic Development Goals

Goal ED-1: Establish a regional name or “branding” for the purposes of building regional identity, facilitating economic development marketing, and promoting tourism (see pg. 31).

Goal ED-2: Create an organizational structure that promotes strong, proactive, and innovative municipal collaboration for the purpose of supporting economic and community development in the Susquehanna River Valley (see pg. 36).

Goal ED-3: Create conditions and incentives highly conducive to recruiting and retaining industrial and manufacturing businesses within the region (see pg. 45).

Goal ED-4: Improve the financial stability and facility capabilities of air transportation services in the region (see pg. 50).

Goal ED-5: Develop the capacity to market and promote the Susquehanna River Valley in terms of the economic, social, health care, tourism, and quality of life benefits and opportunities that it offers (see pg. 52).

Goal ED-6: Promote small business development and help micro-enterprise or home-based business owners to transition to small business status through the provision of technical assistance and financial resources (see pg. 54).

Goal ED-7: Promote a stronger retail sector as a means of stemming expenditure leakage from the region, revitalizing Main Street businesses, and attracting a broader customer base to benefit both retail and service sector businesses (see pg. 59).

Goal ED-8: Develop sources of electricity and alternative energy for the Susquehanna River Valley that will significantly reduce the high energy fixed costs currently burdening the operation of the residential, business, and agriculture sectors (see pg. 62).

Goal ED-9: Insure that agricultural land, particularly lands located adjacent to the Susquehanna River in Unadilla, Sidney, and Bainbridge, is preserved, protected, and promoted on behalf of agricultural development and production (see pg. 72).

Community Development Goals

Goal CD-1: Encourage the participation and preparation of citizens to assume leadership roles for the purpose of implementing the Comprehensive Action Plans and the Susquehanna River Valley Economic Development Strategic Plan (see pg. 76).

Goal CD-2: Promote and support the growth of arts and culture events throughout the Susquehanna River Valley as a means of enhancing the region's cultural experiences and building a sense of community (see pg. 79).

Goal CD-3: Maintain a financially viable and high quality health care delivery system (see pg. 81).

Goal CD-4: Increase the participation of residents of the region in educational programs for the purpose of achieving education levels at least equal to that of New York State (see pg. 84).

Goal CD-5: Develop a regional facility that would enable persons of any age to engage in recreational and athletic activities on a year-round basis (see pg. 86).

Goal CD-6: Promote efforts to attract retirees and provide for elderly transitional housing in the region by identifying sites for retirement communities and varying types of senior housing (see pg. 89).

Goal CD-7: Improve the quality of housing throughout the Susquehanna River Valley (see pg. 95).

Revitalizing Government Goals

Goal RG-1: Improve the capacity of municipal governments to be proactive, focused, and able to provide leadership and support for the implementation of the Community Comprehensive Action Plans and Susquehanna River Valley Economic Development Strategic Plan (see pg. 100).

Goal RG-2: Support professional and educational development for both elected and government officials (see pg. 101).

Goal RG-3: Encourage frequent communication between the elected officials of the six municipalities to share information, discuss issues of mutual concern, and develop strategies for collaboration (see pg. 103).

Goal RG-4: Establish a system to facilitate frequent and interactive communication and sharing of information (e.g., documents) among a regional leadership team and municipal officials within the Susquehanna River Valley (see pg. 104).

Goal RG-5: Explore the feasibility of reducing the number of governments, cost of government, and bureaucratic procedures of local government in the Susquehanna River Valley (see pg. 106).

In summary, the major outcomes of the SRVEDSP are to (1) enhance the Susquehanna River Valley as a place to live and work; (2) create conditions conducive to economic growth and prosperity for businesses; and (3) promote intermunicipal collaboration. In particular, a major premise of the SRVEDSP is that future economic prosperity and community development is far more likely if the six municipalities of the region join together to create a unified, mobilized, and focused regional entity, rather than to “go it alone” as they have historically. However, in order for these outcomes to happen, there will need to be significant changes in the way that people in and out of government conduct their work.

Most plans that are created to achieve economic development invariably seek to design systems and programs that will enable motivated people to accomplish the goals of these plans. This strategic plan is no different. However, despite the importance of systems and programs, it must be remembered that they do not achieve results, people do. The successful implementation of the SRVEDSP will depend on (1) the sustained commitment and collaborative efforts of business, government, and community leaders and (2) the generous contribution of time and effort by hundreds of citizen volunteers.

Since the SRVEDSP recommends changing many current community and economic development practices, some of which entail a degree of risk, then leadership will greatly determine its ultimate success. The challenge for leaders will be to convey to the public that the SRVEDSP is not so much a break with the past as an effort to keep pace with the present. Rural communities across New York State and the nation are in competition to reap economic advantages by using place marketing. Philip Kotler, *et. al.*, have noted in their book Marketing Places, that historically economic development has been a key goal of most communities; however, in the 1990s many communities shifted from “a narrow view of economic development to a broad set of strategies to attract new businesses, retain old ones, develop overseas trade, build tourism, and attract outside investors.” The reality that will determine the future fate of rural communities is indeed a competitive environment. Thus, the important question that every community faces is: Do we want to compete? Do we want to “get into the game?”

The SRVEDSP constitutes a means of positioning the Susquehanna River Valley to join the competition. Making the effort to implement the plan is recognition that the region must seriously confront the problematic demographic, economic, and quality of life trends that have impacted the region in the last 25 years. In this way, implementation of the SRVEDSP will represent a commitment to break with the past and focus on a new course for the future.

As noted previously, the SRVEDSP is only a plan consisting of strategies and programs. On a deeper level, the plan is a call for vigorous, highly principled civic participation. In this regard, perhaps Adam Smith said it best when he noted that “He is certainly not a good citizen who does not wish to promote, by every means in his power, the welfare of the whole society of his fellow-citizens.” As time unfolds, the SRVEDSP may prove to be a test of Smith’s words for the people of the Susquehanna River Valley. In the short term it represents an exciting opportunity to begin to realize a new and promising future.