

(T) Van Buren Comprehensive Plan Update

Kick-off Meeting Summary Notes

Date & Time: April 29, 2025 4:30 pm

Location: Van Buren Municipal Building, 7575 Van Buren Road, Baldwinsville, NY 13027

Attendees:

Comprehensive Plan Committee

Robert Grover, Committee Chair

Thomas Fuzia

Jesse McMahon

Janet Rasbeck

Chris Sherwood

Jennifer Sullivan

Wendy Van Der Water

Jason Hoy (absent)

Darcie Lesniak (absent)

Barton & Loguidice

Dan Theobald, Project Community Planner

Silvi Patel, Community Planner

Danielle Pottinger, Community Planner

Introduction

This meeting marked the official kickoff of the Town of Van Buren's Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Code Update, and the first project committee meeting since the Town entered into contract with Barton & Loguidice (B&L) on March 24, 2025. The purpose of the meeting was to introduce the project team and committee members, review the scope and timeline of the planning effort, and begin initial conversations to help shape a shared vision for the Town.

The meeting was led by Dan Theobald, AICP, a Community Planner based in Syracuse and Project Manager for the Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Code Update. He was joined by two B&L colleagues who will be the lead authors of the plan:

- Silvi Patel, Community Planner, Buffalo, NY
- Danielle Pottinger, Community Planner, Albany, NY

Prior to the meeting, Dan, Silvi, and Danielle toured the Town with Town Supervisor Wendy Van Der Water and Committee Chair Bob Grover. The tour included key areas such as the Town's commercial corridors, the Town Park, Harbor Heights neighborhood, rural lands, the Old Erie Canal / Empire State Trail, and the Village of Baldwinsville (on the Van Buren side).

The meeting agenda included the following items:

1. Project Overview: Team, Scope, Schedule
2. What is a Comprehensive Plan?
3. Community Profile: Demographic Trends and Mapping
4. Previous Planning Efforts
5. SWOT Analysis / Discussion
6. Next Steps





Project Overview

The committee began by introducing themselves:

- **Jen Sullivan** – Lifelong Van Buren resident, Commercial Property Manager, and Town Councilor
- **Chris Sherwood** – Van Buren resident of 13 years, owns horses in Town, DPW Superintendent for the Village of Manlius
- **Bob Grover** – Resident of Harbor Heights since 2009, Small Business Owner in Syracuse, Deputy Town Supervisor
- **Wendy Van Der Water** – Town Supervisor for the last 8 months, Real Estate Manager at St. Joseph’s Hospital, with an interest in local real estate
- **Janet Rasbeck** – Resident of Harbor Heights for 36 years, originally from Scotia-Glenville
- **Jesse McMahon** – Planning Board member, originally from Van Buren, former Onondaga County employee at PlanOn, now works at Micron

Dan presented the project’s scope and timeline. The Comprehensive Plan is expected to take approximately one year to complete, followed by a six-month process to update the Town’s Zoning Code.

He then provided an overview of what a Comprehensive Plan is and how it benefits communities by setting a long-term vision for land use, development, infrastructure, and community character.

Community Profile

Danielle then presented the draft Community Profile, which highlighted the following key findings:

- Van Buren’s population is growing at a faster rate than both Onondaga County and New York State.
- From 2010–2020, Van Buren had the highest population growth rate of any town in the County, followed by Lysander.
- Housing unit growth has generally matched the population increase.
- The population is well-balanced across most age groups, though there is a noticeable decline in residents under 19 and aged 35–54, suggesting fewer young families moving into the town or families are aging in place.
- The Town’s population is aging, with increases in the 55–64 and 65+ age groups.
- Median household income is rising at a pace similar to the County and State.
- Unemployment and poverty rates are low.
- Industry employment trends in Van Buren mirror those of the County and State, though surprisingly few residents (3%) work in agriculture despite the Town’s rural nature.

Previous Planning Efforts

Silvi presented a review of past planning efforts, including Plan Onondaga (2023) – the County’s Comprehensive Plan, which highlighted several Van Buren areas as “Strong Centers”:

- Downer Street (Emerging Center)
- Interstate Island (Employment Center near I-690/I-90)
- Warners (Traditional Hamlet Center)

Greenways and blueways were also a focus of the Onondaga County Plan. Areas highlighted in Van Buren include the Seneca River (part of the State’s Barge Canal) and the portion of the Old Erie Canal (Empire State Trail) that goes through the southern part of the Town.



Dan briefly went over the Town's 2002 Comprehensive Plan. He acknowledged it as a good foundation, but noted that it is outdated, overly focused on background data, and lacking actionable strategies or assigned responsibilities.

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis

Please find the SWOT Notes at the end of this document. The SWOT analysis for the Town of Van Buren highlights the town's identity as a close-knit, safe, and rural community with convenient access to regional amenities. Strengths include its proximity to interstates and major roads, a great school district, a variety of amenities including recreational assets like the Seneca River, the Town-owned parks, and the Empire State Trail (Old Erie Canal). Residents also benefit from a range of housing types (though often expensive), as well as services for older adults, including a senior center and age-friendly housing options. Van Buren's location—near Syracuse but with a quieter, more spacious character—adds to its appeal.

However, the town faces several challenges, particularly around traffic congestion, limited walkability, and a lack of restaurants. Housing affordability is also a growing concern, likely driven by limited inventory. Despite these weaknesses, Van Buren has opportunities to attract young families, better leverage natural assets like the Seneca River and Empire State Trail, and enhance commercial and industrial corridors. Threats include the risk of overdevelopment, especially high-density residential projects that may not align with the community's character, as well as increasing pressure from utility-scale solar development. These insights will inform strategies that reinforce Van Buren's strengths while proactively addressing growth, infrastructure, and quality-of-life considerations.

Next Steps

- Schedule Next Committee Meeting
- Draft Community Profile & Previous Planning Efforts
- Begin Drafting Vision Statement
- Draft Survey Questions
- Launch Project Website

SWOT Notes

Below are the notes taken, by topic area, of the SWOT analysis.

Van Buren

Strengths • Close knit community • School District; • Safe community; • Being rural but close to amenities • Being near interstate, major roads • Close to the city but not too close • Groceries stores: Aldi, Tops, Big M; • Quality housing and housing choice (but expensive) • Town-owned Parks • Age friendly (senior center, housing) • Seneca River	Weaknesses • Traffic • Walkability • Not enough restaurants • Affordable housing and availability
Opportunities • Tapping into young families to move to Van Buren • Seneca River • Empire State Trail / Old Erie Canal • Jones Road;	Threats • Overdevelopment: residential, creating too much density • Solar;

Transportation

Strengths • Roads are well maintained	Weaknesses • Congestion points with traffic: Village Green 690 off-ramp; 690 off-ramps in general • Public transit
Opportunities • Sidewalk network: the Town needs more sidewalks (in more dense areas), up Van Buran Road to Ray; Maple Road; identify gaps and pedestrian crossings • Bike lanes	

Infrastructure

Strengths • New developments have good water / wastewater systems • There is a new wastewater plant	Weaknesses • Some areas don't have cable • Only Spectrum
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Economic Development

Opportunities • Potential for public's desire for multi use development; identify areas • Identifying areas for amenities near housing / apartments



Agriculture

Strengths Local Farms;	Weaknesses Lacking agri-tourism
Opportunities - State agricultural districts* - County agricultural districts* - Work on relationships with local farmers	Threats - Residential development such as dense subdivisions - Solar

**These districts offer benefits such as tax breaks for farming practices*

Parks and Recreation

Strengths - Town Park, it is big and has a lot of amenities: fishing; basketball; disc golf; playgrounds, pool, etc. - Memphis parks; - Harbor heights park;	Weaknesses Visual appearance of the pond at Town Park
Opportunities - Tennis courts; - Whiskey Hollow;	

Waterfront

Weaknesses - Lots of the waterfront is private; - Existing conditions at the Old Erie Canal: the actual trail; parking; signage - Lions Park boat launch - The shoreline is impacted by floodway and floodplain encroachment
Opportunities - Improving Erie canal trail conditions / signage / parking - Rehabilitate Lions Park boat launch - A Greenway trail along Seneca River - Explore opportunities to have public access to the waterfront (through site plan review process; property agreements, easements, etc.)