

## *Electronics Recycling, a Challenge to Our Habits*

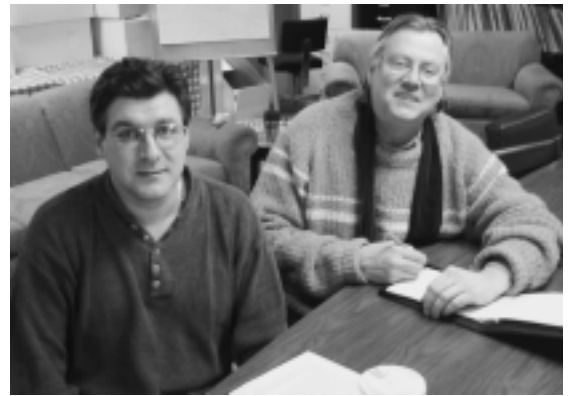
*An interview with Steve Fontaine*

by Patrick Pinkson-Burke, Solid Waste Specialist

The computer which sits on your desk, or the television which brings world images into your home, may be hazardous to your health. I'm not just referring to the programming; I'm referring to the hazardous metals and waste that go into their production as well as the harmful materials that fill these ubiquitous boxes and monitors found in our homes and offices.

It has been estimated that over the next ten years 315 million computers will inundate the national waste infrastructure. Approximately 95% of discarded computers end up in the solid waste stream. In addition, the nationwide change to digital television broadcasting will result in millions of conventional televisions becoming obsolete. The cathode ray tube (CRT)

found in most televisions and computer monitors contains between three to eight pounds of lead. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates that as much as 30 percent of the lead found in municipal waste comes from



Steve Fontaine and Patrick Pinkson-Burke

the disposal of CRTs. The State of Massachusetts has imposed a disposal ban on CRTs and televisions at facilities in the state. Other states are exploring similar bans. Additionally, as much as 49 pounds of hazardous materials, and another 90 pounds of non-hazardous waste, are used during the manufacturing process to create one 55-pound computer! [For more information see *Stuff: The Secret Lives of Everyday Things* by J. Ryan and A. Darning. Published by Northwest Environmental Watch, Seattle, WA, 1997.]

Employees at RHI rely heavily on their computer resources and the technical team which supports them. I recently had the opportunity to discuss RHI's electronics and recycling policies and practices with RHI's network administrator, Steve Fontaine.

(continued on page 4)



# Director's Notes . . .



John McCarthy

It is my privilege to once again address readers from these pages as a member of the Northeast Rural Community Assistance Program. With this issue we welcome new Water Resources Specialists Diane Perley in Vermont, Sherry Baker in Northwestern Pennsylvania, Sarah Curley in Western Massachusetts and Juan Campos in Puerto Rico. Juan's self-introduction is a fine statement on the motivations of a technical assistance provider.

The articles in this newsletter address topics we think relevant to those who work to improve water and waste infrastructure and quality of life for small, lower income rural communities. Kevin Smith of New York state's Tug Hill Commission sets the stage for two articles covering strategic planning as an essential element of water and waste development. Our field staff members have learned from working with small communities that water infrastructure projects can be uniquely valuable to the future of communities, especially when planned and carried out as part of a broader strategic vision.

Many of our people have enough years of working with small community projects that they can look back and see the impact a drinking or waste water project had on the build-out of small community residential and commercial space.

Our staff have learned that a community's economic prosperity and quality of life is often strongly affected by decisions made early in the planning process. Sometimes these decisions are made with insufficient thought about their

long term impact on housing development, user rates, open space, recreation and their ability to attract employers of choice to the area. Our water and waste specialists have learned that the ultimate success of a water infrastructure project may be determined by decisions about where to extend the collection or distribution lines, which groups and organizations to consult with in the early stages, the funding package used to pay the long term capital costs, or by other factors that link the infrastructure project to the community's future.

Although the topic is complex, the articles here make the need for comprehensive planning easier to understand. The first article on this theme is written by James C. Smith of the NY State Department of Environmental Conservation. J.C. describes in some detail the significant steps in the planning, funding and project implementation for a wastewater project in the community of Jasper, NY. Then Chris Nill of our New York staff talks about the theory and rationale for small community strategic planning. He describes the steps that should be taken and the role of technical assistance providers and professional planners.

He uses the example of Owego, NY to show us how a sound planning process can work.

To start us off, this issue begins with two fine articles on topics related to solid waste management. Pat Pinkson-Burke and Michael Pattavina both provide food for thought on how and why we take responsibility for the natural resources we use and then discard.

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John McCarthy  
Program Director



# “Why Do You Recycle?”


by Michael Pattavina, Solid Waste Specialist

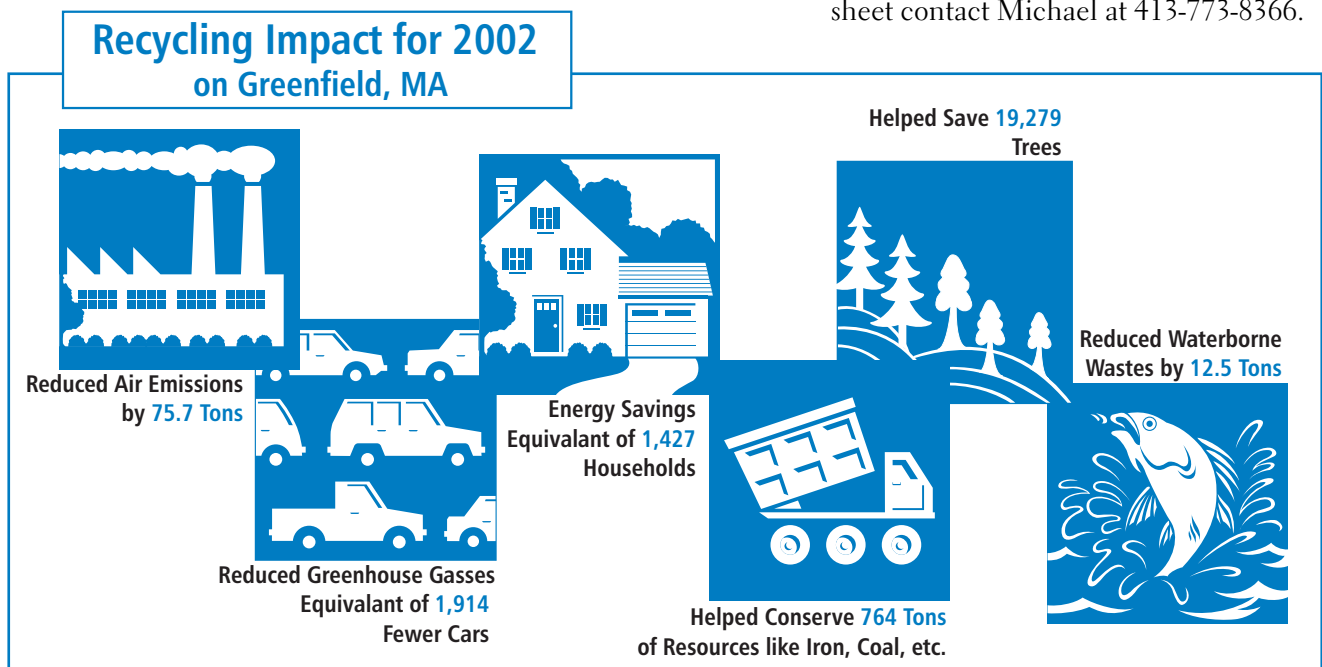
When asked why do you recycle, many people will answer: “It is the right thing to do”. Of course most recycling coordinators agree with this, but we also think that recyclers need to respond to the question of “why” with more than beliefs or feelings. In our current economic climate, community officials are making difficult decisions about how to spend limited financial resources. In many cases our community recycling efforts will be scrutinized, possibly resulting in the scaling back of these important programs. Therefore it is a good idea that we advocate for recycling with the *facts* about the benefits of recycling in our communities.

To assist us in obtaining the facts on our individual community recycling efforts, the National Recycling Coalition (NRC) has created a calculator that measures how much our recycling programs are improving the environment. By entering the data on the amount of materials recycled and disposed of in your community, the calculator will determine the environmental benefits of your community’s recycling program in four key areas: energy savings,

reductions in greenhouse emissions, reductions in the emissions of air and water pollutants, and conservation of natural resources.

For example, when we plug in the amounts of materials recycled in the Town of Greenfield, Massachusetts, for 2002, we can determine that by recycling 40% of its waste, the Town helped save 19,279 trees, generated an energy savings in the equivalent of 1,427 households, reduced greenhouse gasses in the equivalent of 1,914 passenger cars (off the road), helped conserve 764 tons of resources (iron ore, coal, limestone), reduced air emissions by 75.7 tons and lowered waterborne wastes by 12.5 tons.

RHI, the Northeast RCAP invites you to develop a fact sheet on the benefits of recycling for your community. The calculator is a database program in Excel and your computer will need to have this software in order to run the program. In addition you will need the information on your community’s recycling program. You can get access to the calculator from the NRC website [www.nrc-recycle.org](http://www.nrc-recycle.org) or e-mail Michael Pattavina at [mpatt@rhircap.org](mailto:mpatt@rhircap.org) and it will be sent as an attachment to an e-mail. For more info or assistance in creating your fact sheet contact Michael at 413-773-8366. 



## Electronics Recycling Challenge (cont'd from pg. 1)

Some simple steps to improve your work environment include:

- Using both sides of the paper—copy on the back;
- If you are just printing e-mail, print it on scrap paper;
- Use scrap paper for notes;
- Reuse manila envelopes;
- Send ink jet cartridges back (most post offices provide prepaid plastic bag envelopes for sending in ink jet cartridges at no cost);

(more steps on next page)

*Patrick: Where does Information Technology (IT) fit in the overall scheme of recycling at RHI?*

Steve: First of all, I want to point out that RHI's Board of Directors feels strongly that being able to use modern technical equipment is essential to our efforts to respond to community needs. To do that, we in IT need to balance keeping current with technological advances while at the same time managing our expenditures in a responsible manner. Recycling is not only good for the environment, we're using it to help keep down costs. We reuse as much electronic equipment as possible, now.

*Patrick: Do you upgrade computers through purchasing, or do you rebuild them and reuse them?*

Steve: At this point we do a combination of purchasing and rebuilding. With new purchases, a "no-monitor option" is selected if the current monitor is adequate. Also, we do rebuild and upgrade some machines.

*Patrick: What about all the packaging used to send computers and other hardware. Does RHI recycle or reuse any of this?*

Steve: When computers are received, IT uses a high percentage of the packing material again to ship items to remote staff. Any leftover boxes are recycled with paper and corrugated box material.

*Patrick: Monitors or cathode ray tubes contain lead and other toxic materials. How do you handle these and what happens at the end of their useful lives?*

Steve: Right now, monitors are in storage and shortly we will be working with

a local computer-recycling center to get the monitors properly disposed of.

*Patrick: Ink jet and toner cartridges can often be refilled. Does RHI do anything to encourage the recycling of these items?*

Steve: Yes. We don't refill cartridges here in house, but all cartridges are being recycled using several different programs. This department will not purchase cartridges from any vendor that is not involved in a recycling program. Currently we use HP and Viking Office products because of their recycling programs.

*Patrick: Many computer manufacturers offer equipment take-back programs. Does RHI participate in these programs? How?*

Steve: RHI does not participate in these programs now but hopes to in the near future.

*Patrick: How does RHI inform new and existing employees about electronic reuse and recycling programs?*

Steve: Employees are told about this verbally now. We provide recycling program information during employee orientation for new staff, too.

*Patrick: Does RHI offer any assistance to field staff in reducing waste and encouraging reuse/recycling?*

Steve: Currently we do not offer assistance to field staff for reducing waste. I would like to see the agency more pro-active in the future on this topic.

*Patrick: Does RHI have a formal paper reduction policy?*

Steve: Last year we started sending our weekly newsletter electronically rather than by paper. Also, the availability of high-speed scanners has prompted employees to start sending manuals electronically instead of printing and mailing when copyrights permit. We have started to encourage groups to find ways to achieve paperwork reduction, but this is as much an informal cultural encouragement as anything else.



## Electronics Recycling Challenge (cont'd)



Some simple steps continued

- Use rechargeable batteries and return them to your local hardware store or recycling center when they won't hold a charge any longer;
- When buying new computers, buy a laptop (they don't use as many resources to manufacture and the monitor uses no lead);
- Upgrade existing computers rather than buying a whole new unit (it is less expensive and uses fewer resources); and finally—
- Think before you buy: do I really need this or do I just want it?

*Patrick: We've all heard about a "paperless office". Has RHI done anything to promote this concept?*


Steve: Small projects have been started with respect to the paperless office. A higher percentage of information is now distributed with e-mail or FTP electronically. Care has to be taken here: other external agencies have reporting standards that RHI must adhere to. Some reports are already being submitted electronically rather than on paper via 'snail mail'. Several managers are currently negotiating with other outside agencies and asking about what could be moved to an electronic medium.

*Patrick: Does RHI have an environmental purchasing policy—such as buying post-consumer recycled content paper, giving extra purchasing preference to manufacturers that take back and reuse their electronics or purchasing LCD monitors rather than CRT monitors?*

Steve: We've particularly targeted some equipment vendors because they offer recycling programs. We mentioned that earlier when it came to managing ink cartridges, for example. As to paper: the terms under which we receive

certain funding require that we use paper with recycled content for specific mailings and newsletters. It is the case that RHI does not currently have a **broad-based** environmental purchasing policy. I would like to see one in place within a year or two. But at least we're getting started in the process.

*Patrick: Is there anything else you think people should be thinking about with regard to electronics waste?*

Steve: IT managers should be watching out for all portable devices with batteries and making sure of their proper disposal. The number of handheld 'palm pilots' (PDAs) and cell phones, cordless phones and tablets will steadily increase over the next few years and all companies will have to address this issue. 

RHI has started to think about the long and short term environmental effects our services and their delivery are having. It is apparent we have a long way to go. However, each step we take to encourage recycling and reuse in the agency is a step forward. RHI has been going through major changes during the past year and a half. Our new CEO, Karen Koller, has brought a new, modern management style to the agency and our management structure is in revision. Our IT team is seeking ways to reduce e-waste and reuse equipment as much as possible. Perhaps, in the near future, RHI will form a multi-faceted team to develop formal environmental policies for the office and field staff. Until that time, every employee has to think about ways to reduce waste, reuse paper and equipment, and the effect of their actions on the environment.

# Reflections on the Sources of Inspiration for Technical Assistance

by Juan Campos, Water Resources Specialist, Puerto Rico

How does my background help me to do a better job as an RCAP technical assistance provider? I have to go back to my youth, when I decided to become an engineer because I wanted to do something that would help people to have a better life. I thought that being a civil engineer was the best way to do that, with all due respect to other disciplines. My first opportunity to work was with the Drinking Water Program of the Puerto Rico Department of Health, with responsibility to supervise and assure the quality of drinking water while at the same time protecting the people's health—all from the point of view of compliance with the local and federal laws and rules.



Juan Campos

In order to achieve compliance in the community systems, among other things I had to give educational lectures so people would understand the health risks involved and why the law requires certain improvements to their systems. I assisted them in community organization, including the development of management committees, setting rules to guide the community, undertaking incorporation processes, developing action plans for improvements, obtaining extensions of time for compliance as needed, as well as supervising and participating in the improvements.

There were significant limitations of time to dedicate to each community because of the number of sanitary surveys, inspections and follow-ups assigned each year. Nevertheless, we established good relations with most of the communities. Of course, there are some that do not want to let anybody help them. This helped me understand how difficult it is to interact with

a group of people in order to find out how best to fulfill their needs—even though the solutions identified were not necessarily the best ways.

To complicate the scene, I was “the bad cop,” telling them what they have to do, without providing money or materials to accomplish compliance objectives. That is the way they see it, and they often say so! Fourteen years of experience have taught me that it is not just a matter of complying with the rules to protect the people's health, but rather the goal is to protect the people *first*—and along the way the compliance is accomplished.

Last October I joined an organization whose first commitment is to improve the quality of life of rural communities in aspects like drinking water, wastewater, solid waste and housing. Rural Housing Improvement, the Northeast RCAP, brings me the opportunity to work with the communities from the human point of view, to help them to solve their water and wastewater problems. Now that I have the interaction experience with communities and understand the kinds of problems they deal with (personal, interpersonal, political, economic, limitations of resources, etc.), the RCAP approach and the specific technical assistance I provide will be more oriented to what the community needs.

What makes the difference between what RHI and other organizations or agencies bring to the communities is not only a matter of experience, knowledge, genuine interest or care, but a combination of all these, and especially the love we put into what we do. That is something you cannot explain easily, nor define or measure. We are common people, doing common things with an extraordinary sense of service to others.



# Meet Other New Staff, Working...

## *In Pennsylvania*

Sherry Baker joined us in December to improve RCAP's ability to assist communities in Northwest Pennsylvania. "It's wonderful to be able to help communities in this region. Finding RCAP was a double blessing. Not only do I get to perform meaningful work helping others, I get to do it here!" she exclaims.

Sherry is a native of the area; she grew up in Erie, Pennsylvania. After spending a year in



Left to right: Sherry Baker, Diane Perley and Sarah Curley

Sweden as a Rotary exchange student, Sherry attended Allegheny College in nearby Meadville, PA to receive her bachelors degree in environmental science. In 1997, she moved to Ames, Iowa and worked as a research assistant and teaching

assistant for the Department of Agricultural & Biosystems Engineering at Iowa State University while earning her masters degree in water resources. Sherry spent a significant amount of time studying large-scale composting systems, and was hired by a private company in Iowa to start up and manage one of the largest compost facilities in the Midwest.

Prior to joining RCAP, Sherry returned to Erie, PA and worked for an engineering company reviewing technical specifications, writing RFPs and negotiating prices for major equipment in heat recovery steam generators. Sherry is very happy to have the opportunity to serve with RCAP in an area she cares deeply about, and she looks forward to working closely with the other technical assistance providers in Pennsylvania.

## *In Vermont and New Hampshire*

After many years of working with communities in New York State, Diane Perley, P.E. has joined RHI as a Water Resources Specialist in

South Burlington, Vermont. In her over 20 years of experience with the NYS Environmental Facilities Corporation and Department of Environmental Conservation, she focused on co-funding, affordability, technical assistance and other small community issues. Diane says, "I've worked with many of the RCAP staff over the years so I'm excited to be joining such a great group of people. My plans are to do what I like to do: help small communities build appropriate, affordable water and wastewater projects that fit in with the local vision of what they want their community to become."

## *In Southern New England*

Sarah Curley has over two years of experience working with a mapping contractor for the Federal Emergency Management Agency's National Flood Insurance Program, where she mapped statistically modeled flood zones for communities along the east coast, including Rockingham County, the first countywide flood hazard study for the State of New Hampshire. Utilizing Geographic Information Systems and various hydrologic and hydraulic models, Sarah produced Flood Insurance Rate Maps and Flood Insurance Study reports for FEMA. Following Hurricane Floyd, Sarah did disaster relief for FEMA. Working closely with FEMA and homeowners, she inspected homes and assessed flood damage to these homes. Her skills in coordination with the client and local communities will be valuable as a Water Resource Specialist for the Northeast RCAP in Southern New England.

"I am eager to work with the local communities on a more personal level, identifying issues and working together to solve problems," Sarah told us. "I also look forward to developing my skills in GIS further, for the benefit of both RCAP and the communities we serve. GIS is a dynamic tool that can be used to visually describe a community and it's attributes. Incorporating GIS into our projects will allow for a better understanding of the community, giving us the best tools to identify and resolve issues."



# Instead of Biting Off Problems One By One...

*The benefits of strategic planning in rural communities are significant. Two case studies show the impact.*

*Communities are turning to strategic planning, a way of thinking. It recognizes that one has limited time and resources with which to work. Strategic planning is based on the premise that most of the factors, issues and trends in any given community are interrelated. **The more that the communications task links those strategic elements, the closer strategic planning gets to comprehensiveness.***

Most small communities are not organized in a way that facilitates comprehensive planning. They don't have the time, the money or the qualified help to do it. Technical assistance providers have the opportunity to inspire and assist communities with their sense of strategic initiative. They have the ability to network with professionals in other disciplines so that isolated strategic initiatives can become part of a more comprehensive way of thinking. They also have the ability to foster communication: communication between communities, between communities and funders, or with others in a drainage basin. Effective communication, combined with a strategic sensibility, can help put small communities back in the driver's seat—and moving forward with confidence towards a more prosperous, secure, and livable future.

*Kevin Smith, Program Director  
The Tug Hill Commission (NY)*

## Strategic Planning Delivers Success in Jasper, New York

*by James C. Smith, Environmental Project Manager, NYS Environmental Facilities Corporation*



**T**he Town of Jasper is a quiet rural community, lying at the southwest corner of Steuben County, not far from the NY/Pennsylvania state line. Jasper epitomizes the classic definition of the rural lifestyle and landscape. Tremendous amounts of open space, stunning views, and a strong sense of community and inter-dependence are hallmarks of Jasper. Like many other small communities located off of major travel corridors, most people are employed outside the immediate area.

By and large there has been little or no growth in recent decades. In fact, the increase in town-wide population between 1990 and 2000 is generally acknowledged to be wholly a function of immigration of Amish families, who find the landscape and low population density supportive of their way of life.

### *A Challenge for Jasper*

**S**o what does all this have to do with strategic planning? The answer is really a story, which begins around 1999, when the Jasper Town Board had a sense that the community was interested in stronger action on community betterment issues.

To this end, Town Supervisor Lucille Kernan set to work on re-construction of the town's Planning Board and appointed as chair, Carol Whitehead, a person with strong roots in the community and tremendous organizational and management skills. Carol realized that any action by the Planning Board needed to reflect the consensus of the community.

In 1999, Ms. Whitehead led completion of a town-wide Community and Entrepreneurial Profile. This profile asked a broad range of

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## Strategic Planning Delivers Success

(cont'd)

questions, many of which were about the qualities of Jasper that people most appreciated, problems needing attention or challenges lying ahead.

Without going into great detail, a core set of ideas rose up out of the survey. Better housing, local services and local job opportunities were noted as improvements most important to people in the community. The hamlet of Jasper was recognized as the section of town where success in those areas was most likely. Furthermore, the survey revealed that lack of utilities such as water, natural gas or wastewater collection were understood to be the biggest barriers to the improvements the community desired.

The general planning project the Planning Board started took a **strategic** turn when they saw the focus that the community had handed them. They temporarily set aside other town-wide planning actions to define a project that could accomplish the strategic goals discovered in their community assessment efforts.

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*In the end, however, the project was very competitive for funding because the people of Jasper had a story to tell the funding agencies.*

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*Collecting Information to enable wise decision-making\*:*

- *Formation of Jasper Water / Wastewater Ad-Hoc Committee*
- *Needs Assessment Survey Conducted by Northeast RCAP in May 2001*
- *Private Well Sampling Performed by NYSDOH in May 2001*
- *Dye Testing Performed by Ad-Hoc Committee in June/July 2001*
- *MRB Group, PC Authorized by Town Board to Prepare Preliminary Engineering Report in Fall of 2001*

### Identifying options

By now it's the summer of 2000. Jasper had the good fortune to have access to two informational programs just when those programs were most useful. Through USDA Rural Development's Champion Communities Program, they participated in similar regional assessment activities with nearby local governments. They also saw how other communities were responding to similar needs. The Southern Tier Central Regional Planning and Development Board's Community Connections Program built on this idea. The Community Connections program was designed by Steve Dennis, then with STC RPDB, to make links for local governments with an array of technical services, project funders and community leaders with relevant experiences to share. By February 2001, Supervisor Kernan, working with the Planning Board, shifted planning and project exploration to an Ad Hoc Water/Waste-

water Committee. This committee was the vessel that held the information gathered to date, and their first real action was to hold a public information meeting in March of 2001.

### Citizen participation

As technical service providers, we've all seen the scenario where local officials balk at the notion of a public meeting early in project development. "Where are the facts we need to share?" they often ask. In reality, there was a wealth of information that the public needed to see. That meeting, held in the public high school auditorium, reported the following:

- Results of the Master Plan survey,
- Knowledge harvested from the Champion Communities and Community Connections programs, and
- Plans to collect more specific information from the community about its infrastructure needs.

### Next steps

With good organization and advertisement, the meeting was well attended and the exploratory plans of the Ad Hoc committee were well received. That spring, three simultaneous investigations were completed. With help from the NYS Dept. of Health, private water supplies in the hamlet were sampled and analyzed for bacterial and nitrate contaminants. Catherine Rees, RCAP's staffer in the Southern Tier, led a community needs survey of the condition and type of on-site water supplies and septic systems serving their properties, and opinion of property owners as to water and wastewater needs. The Ad Hoc committee also completed dye tests on a voluntary basis of most on-site septic systems within the hamlet. They went back to the public with another informational meeting in July of 2001.

(continued on page 10)

### *More public involvement—leads to support*

What did the public learn at that meeting?

- Factual information was reported about the overall incidence of water supply contamination at the time of sampling, including the significantly widespread failure rate of septic systems as evidenced by dye tests.
- Statistics collected about the character and age of on-site water and sewage systems were presented.
- One of the most significant statistics explained to the attendees came out of the on-site survey led by Catherine Rees. Of 90 respondents to the survey, 79 believed the community needed a public water or wastewater system, and 72 respondents favored development of a public sewage treatment system.

Knowing the significance of the data, the Ad Hoc committee recommended to the public and the town board that a qualified engineering consultant be hired to assess the costs and character of water or sewer improvements for the hamlet.

Feedback from the public was very positive and consistent with the Ad Hoc committee's expectations. Again, the work initially started by the Jasper Town Supervisor, and now in the hands of the Ad Hoc Water/Wastewater Committee, had been given more focus, and was poised for another strategic step.

### *Dealing with engineering reports and documenting financial need*

In the ensuing months, an RFP was issued, engineering consultants interviewed, and a contract awarded by the Jasper Town Board for development of two stand-alone engineering reports. One addressed a public water supply system and the other a public wastewater collection and treatment system. Simultaneously,

the Ad Hoc Water/Wastewater Committee initiated an income survey within the hamlet of Jasper, again with extremely effective service from RCAP staffer Catherine Rees. Both of these actions were done with an implementation plan and schedule in mind. The Ad Hoc Committee did not simply look to complete these activities, but expected to complete these, chose a project priority and made a funding application *by an April, 2002 deadline* to the NYS Governor's Office For Small Cities for Community Development Block Grant funds. That winter, a lot of people were very busy getting ready for the next presentation to the public.

### *Checking with the community, again*

Part of the Ad Hoc Committee's implementation schedule included public meetings. In January 2002, the public had the first opportunity to see costs associated with water or sewer improvements, as well as the areas identified as most efficient considering need, engineering and cost. Methods of funding either improvement, and the status of the income survey (incomplete at this time), were provided. As occurred in earlier gatherings, this meeting served not only as a forum to present information to the public, but also as a way to collect feedback and plan following actions based on the reactions of the public.

Feedback from the public was strong and focused. Construction was clearly a priority, reinforcing the expectation set by the community needs survey the previous year. In February, the Town Board voted formally to pursue development of a public wastewater treatment project to serve the hamlet, and funding actions began immediately. In March, a subsequent public meeting was held to discuss the Town Board's decision, present the income survey results, and re-confirm the wastewater treatment project as the community's priority improvement project.

#### *Sewer Alternatives*

##### *Explored\*:*

- *Do Nothing Option*
- *Effluent Collection with Subsurface Disposal*
- *Conventional Collection System with Oxidation Ditches for Treatment*
- *Package Wastewater Treatment Plant Options:*
  - ~ *Rotating Biological Contactors (RBC's)*
  - ~ *Sequencing Batch Reactors (SBR's)*
  - ~ *Upflow Sludge Blanket Filtration (USBF)*

## Strategic Planning Delivers Success (cont'd)

### Project Cost Estimate Considerations /

#### Assumptions\*:

- All work to be publicly bid
- Prevailing wage rates to be paid for all construction work
- Work to be bid through multiple contracts (per Wicks Law)
- Construction start date no sooner than the year 2003 or 2004
- Construction work will need to conform with permit requirements from multiple regulatory agencies
- Project will be subject to additional requirements of Funding Agencies

\* Information provided by MRB Group, PC

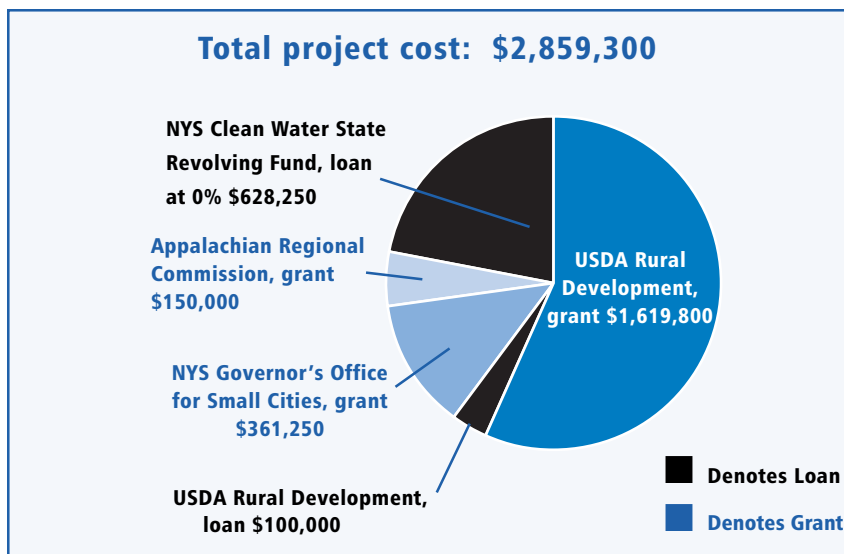
### Moving from ideas to actions

The project now took a clear move out of information gathering and assessment, into analysis of familiar feasibility issues, like State Environmental Quality Review, funding, historic preservation and land acquisition. The organization that made a very substantive information gathering and needs assessment process move so quickly was of enormous value in the work ahead. The project had a clear definition of needs and obvious community interest.

By November 2002, just 13 months after the preliminary engineering work was awarded to the project engineer, the Town Board was successfully able to negotiate all the feasibility processes and complete district formation on the basis of a viable funding package. This winter, the Town submitted complete applications to the NYS Clean Water State Revolving Fund for short term financing, and a complete application to USDA Rural Development for a letter of conditions.

### Looking at the numbers

Up to this point, we've talked about community development activities in the context of a strategic plan. For those of you who want to know, the project numbers look like this:



### Where was the strategic plan?

As a technical service provider, I'd say it was evident, even if it wasn't a deliberately identified action. It's easy to find several ways the Town of Jasper went to the public, listened carefully to what was said, and constantly planned and implemented strategic actions as the focus of their work became more and more defined.

Perhaps the first real strategic plan was the charge given the Town Board by the result of the Planning Board's Master Plan Survey. What made their strategic planning process work, and work so well, was hard work, and good communication. The Ad Hoc committee met every month, from late in 2000 right through to district formation in November of 2002.

### Putting it all together for success

It is true there was a significant effort by technical service providers working on the project to see that actions taken at any one point in time through the project would result in quality information. This made work to be done much later in the project more effective. In the end, however, the project was very competitive for funding because the people of Jasper had a story to tell the funding agencies. Need, public support, local initiative, and project feasibility were all fully considered before the funding agencies saw the first application. If there was any one lesson for us as TA providers that came from this project, I'd say that it is that strategic planning makes our work easier, better informs the public, and makes the project more focused and competitive for the resources needed to solve a community's needs.

For more information about this project, contact:  
Catherine S. Rees, Senior Water Resources Specialist,  
NE RCAP 607 587 9219 -or-  
James C. Smith, Environmental Project Manager,  
NYS Environmental Facilities Corporation  
607 776 4978

# The Future Begins Here: Strategic Planning for Rural Community Development

by Christian A. Nill, Sr. Water Resources Specialist

Many towns and villages have adopted more or less traditional “master plans,” which articulate the community’s vision in terms of shared ideals. But even the best-laid plans can languish on a shelf for twenty years if an effective mechanism is not in place to translate ideals into action. Strategic planning is one such mechanism that can help rural communities build that critical bridge between articulating their collective vision...and actually *implementing* it. The RCAP network has an important role to play in facilitating this process.

RCAP technical assistance providers all across the country have a well established reputation for helping rural communities plan and develop creative solutions to their environmental infrastructure problems. One of the most important lessons we’ve learned through our years of experience in this pursuit is that *environmental infrastructure (water supply, wastewater and solid waste management) cannot be dealt with in isolation from the wider*

*fabric of community issues and challenges.* In most cases infrastructure development represents only part of the solution. Rural community development involves a highly interconnected array of factors, issues and trends. A community with excellent public facilities such as sewer

and water might still fail to achieve its overall vision for the future if there is no plan—no shared *strategy*—to put the other pieces of the puzzle in place.

## A Case in Point: Owego, NY

Recognition of the need for integrated planning caused the Northeast RCAP to assist the Village of Owego, New York in its efforts to coordinate and prioritize plans focusing on economic development and downtown revitalization. Owego, the county seat of rural Tioga County, is a historically-



rich community of just under 4,000 inhabitants. Community leaders in Owego have been planning a number of community improvements for some time. Some of this work was being performed by outside consultants who rarely communicated with one another. The result was a number of quite promising community betterment initiatives, each one of them being independently pursued as an end in itself. There appeared to be a need for an overarching strategy to coordinate community development efforts in Owego.

Sound planning work is never a cost-less undertaking. Wherever possible I encourage communities to pursue funding opportunities such as New York’s technical assistance grants program. In the absence of external funding it is still possible to address the challenge of strategic planning—but a greater share of local resources will be required.

With RCAP assistance, the Village sought and obtained a small grant from the NY Governor’s Office for Small Cities (GOSC). Each year GOSC allocates a portion of its block grant funding for the express purpose of providing technical assistance to small communities in support of local strategic planning initiatives. (Visit [www.nysmallcities.com](http://www.nysmallcities.com).) To quote from Owego’s GOSC funding proposal, “The Village seeks...to undertake a strategic planning process that will be comprehensive in scope, farsighted in outlook, and prudent in the commitment of local resources.” The compre-

(continued on next page)



## *The Future Begins Here: Strategic Planning for Rural Community Development (cont'd)*

### *RCAP Technical Assistance in Support of Strategic Planning:*

- *Assist communities in identifying potentially viable funding options*
- *Assist with development of funding proposals*
- *Assist with developing an RFP and Scope of Work for external consultant*
- *Assist with creating a timetable for plan development*
- *Assist with designing and administering community-based diagnostic surveys, and reporting the results thereof*
- *Coordination between elected officials, consultants, and planning committees*
- *Contribute to capacity development vis-a-vis community-based planning*

hensive Strategic Plan for community development would bring together, coordinate and prioritize action plans for a few individual projects that have already been formulated...as well as articulate possible additional community development priorities that have not yet been addressed. In developing the overarching Strategic Plan, close attention would be paid to the *interrelationships* among various sectors of community development.

Once funding was secured, the next step was to contract the services of a qualified professional planner to guide the strategic planning process. It is worth noting in this connection that the Northeast RCAP is expanding its capabilities to provide significant technical assistance in support of strategic planning for rural community development and consultants they employ. Already a number of specific planning-related tasks can be performed by RCAP Specialists, at significant cost savings to the community. (See sidebar at left.)

Owego secured the services of a highly professional team of planning consultants who could draw on their extensive experience with solutions that have worked out well for other Northeastern communities. The principal consultant was chosen on the basis of a formal Request for Proposals developed and administered with RCAP assistance. Among other things the RFP presented the community's needs and their intended approach to planning, and it offered a detailed scope of work for the prospective consultant.

Over a period of several months the professional planners met regularly with a strategic planning task force made up of local leaders and the Northeast RCAP representative. They toured the village extensively to get a feel for its potential as well as its problem areas. They pored over existing plans for the development of specific areas. They carefully analyzed governance functions such as code enforcement and historic preservation. A well-attended public informational meeting was held to gather

*(continued on page 14)*

### *Ten Tips for Successful Strategic Planning*

- 1) Make sure the governing body adopts a resolution formally committing itself to the strategic planning process.
- 2) Use a carefully crafted RFP and a structured evaluation process to choose an external consultant.
- 3) Develop a planning timetable that is workable, and continually track progress against it.
- 4) Recruit citizen volunteers and insure a wide representation of stakeholder groups.
- 5) Public information is crucial to success: use every available tool such as public meetings, news releases, and mail-out bulletins.
- 6) Adopt and pursue a vigorous policy of capacity development for local leaders.
- 7) Recognize that conflict and disagreement are inevitable, and take proactive measures to resolve differences and build consensus.
- 8) Listen to the sound advice your consultant has to offer, but make sure it is the community that is setting the agenda.
- 9) Take active measures to insure that the strategic plan will be implemented.
- 10) Remember that the strategic plan is a living document that is subject to renewal and revision as things get done and new needs arise.

## *The Future Begins Here: Strategic Planning for Rural Community Development* (cont'd from page 13)

input from local residents and business leaders concerning development priorities, threats and opportunities. This public venue also gave local residents a chance to view and comment on several preliminary strategic proposals that have already been successfully implemented in other, similarly situated communities.

The task force also crafted two diagnostic survey questionnaires, one for residents and another for business owners. These were administered in the Spring of 2002. The excellent response to this survey among local residents stands as testimony to the high level of civic engagement that seems to prevail in Owego. Survey responses were tabulated by the Northeast RCAP. Data trends identified from the findings were used to help shape strategic recommendations in the resulting plan document. All in all, it seems clear that the multiple avenues that were made available for public participation during the assessment process will prove to be key to the fundamental soundness of the resulting plan.

The strategic plan for the Village of Owego is now nearly complete. It can be viewed online, and I would urge readers to take a look at it by visiting the consultant's website at <http://www.shepstone.net/Owego/>. The Owego plan begins with a comprehensive assessment of village resources and trends, and includes a detailed analysis of retail market opportunities. It then launches into a hands-on discussion of

key recommendations for several projects and initiatives aimed at community betterment. Wherever appropriate the plan document discusses workable funding scenarios as well as the marshalling of local resources to get needed projects off the ground. Some of the most exciting project initiatives contemplated in the report center around façade renovations and historic preservation in the downtown business district, as well as creation of cultural and recreational "anchors". The unifying theme behind all of the plan's recommendations revolves around *packaging* the Owego experience in order to maximize the village's potential as a destination for tourists and shoppers.

The implementation of these initiatives will require unflagging commitment as well as a number of specific skills on the part of local leaders and volunteers. One of the most salutary features of Owego's strategic plan is its extended discussion of *capacity development* tools aimed at developing an inventory of local skills that will be needed for successful implementation of the strategic plan. Grantsmanship, information management, effective use of the local media, administration of local revolving loan funds, planning and code enforcement—these and other areas will need to be addressed through a concerted program of activities aimed at growing the local knowledge base and cultivating practical skills for successful implementation of the strategic plan.

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### *Tools & Resources on the Internet*

#### *On community visioning:*

<http://www.drs.wisc.edu/vision/>

*A well organized guide to the whole process, from the University of Wisconsin.*

<http://www.olywa.net/roundtable>

*Is your community sustainable? Find out here!*

#### *On strategic planning theory:*

<http://www.allianceonline.org/faqs.html>

*Excellent summary of the how, why and what of strategic planning. Essential reading!*

#### *A strategic plan worth looking at:*


<http://www.shepstone.net/Owego/>

*This is the Owego, NY strategic plan discussed in this article.*

### *A Conclusion...and a Beginning*

Owego's strategic plan is a work in progress. It is fair to say that even after this planning consultancy draws to a close it will continue to be a work in progress. The community strategic plan is a *living document* that must continually adapt to changing conditions. Insofar as it seeks to coordinate existing plans under a single, overarching vision Owego's strategic plan represents an important departure from past initiatives aimed at community betterment. It provides a coherent blueprint for the future. Thanks to the planning consultant's creative expertise and the validation provided through multiple opportunities for public participation, this document also formulates several new approaches to community revitalization that show great promise. If diligently pursued over the ensuing months, these betterment initiatives will

improve the quality of life of local residents as well as the economic viability of the community as a whole.

The Owego experience also marks a departure and an exciting new direction for the Northeast RCAP, for it is one of several instances in which our field-based technical assistance team has begun to explore new ways to help rural communities fulfill their aspirations. Make no mistake about it, the Northeast RCAP will certainly retain its fundamental commitment to improving rural environmental infrastructure for a long time to come. But development—*any* kind of development—needs to be based on a sound plan, and that plan in turn must be based on a coherent community vision. Strategic planning for rural community development represents a new paradigm that promises to unite these three elements and thereby enable communities to effectively translate vision into reality. 

### *From Community Vision to Project Implementation*

Every community wants to go somewhere. But not everybody in the community may agree where they want to go. Sorting out a sense of direction for the community, articulating a community vision and setting out broad goals and objectives for community development are all part of what we usually refer to as *comprehensive planning*. Translating goals and objectives into action, “making it happen,” is the province of *strategic planning*.

**A Rural Vignette:** An RCAP TA provider was called into the Town of Paradise to help local leaders build a strategy for an ambitious public water supply project. Paradise is a rural community with large expanses of agricultural land, located some 40 miles (i.e., within reasonable commuting distance) from the nearest large urban center—the City of Lifeblood. The city itself is already groaning under the pressures of outward expansion, as more and more families abandon the urban core for the perceived amenities of the countryside. The city is experiencing all of the concomitant problems that may be expected under these circumstances—declining tax base, diminishing retail trade, deteriorating services, and increasing poverty and crime as the more affluent among the residents pick up and leave. Yet the City of Lifeblood also has much to recommend it: cultural activities, museums, an urban university campus, a philharmonic orchestra.

Meanwhile in Paradise, the sparse population of the town's idyllic countryside already exhibits a mixture of agricultural and non-agricultural households. What will a major public water supply project do to the Town of Paradise? Will it accommodate projected growth? Or will it stimulate unanticipated growth? What will happen to agriculture in the Town? What will happen to the “rural character” that everyone enjoys there? What is the community's *vision* for its future? Does water supply development fit in with that vision? How? The answer to “**How?**” is the **strategy**. But the **vision** must come first.

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