John S. Nader,
Mayor

City of Oneonta
Comprehensive Plan

Focus Group Summary
June 2006

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Overview / Focus Group Format

In June 2006, a series of focus groups were held to facilitate in-depth discussion on a variety of issues related to the City of Oneonta. As part of the process of updating the City's Comprehensive Plan, the focus groups are a key opportunity for public input, in addition to a community survey, a public workshop, and representation on the Steering Committee. The input provided by each focus group is the foundation for creating policies in the Plan. This input is critical in formulating policy statements for each topic, which then form the basis for identifying specific objectives and recommendations that the community should pursue.

In order to determine the topics for the focus groups, meetings were held with the Steering Committee and a community stakeholders group. A Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (S.W.O.T.) analysis was performed in each meeting. The dozens of comments received through the S.W.O.T. analysis were then examined to look for common themes and topics. It was determined that the majority of comments could be grouped into five specific areas, which became the topics for the focus groups:

1) Destination & Image
2) Economic Health & Revitalization
3) Quality of Life
4) Downtown
5) Administration & Government

Prior to the focus group meetings, participants were given a series of questions related to their respective topics to consider as preparation for the discussion. The groups, which were made up of between 7 and 15 participants, then met for two hours to discuss their topics. Planning staff from Clark Patterson Associates and staff from the SUNY Oneonta Center for Economic and Community Development facilitated the groups. The discussions consisted of first identifying a series of priority issues within each topic, followed by brainstorming ideas for potential solutions and/or recommendations. The following provides an overview of each focus group and the policy statements and objectives that were derived from the discussions.

Focus Group 1—Destination & Image

Facilitator	Participants	
Kevin Kelley,	Keith Bundy	Robert Scanlon
Clark Patterson Associates	Richard Breuninger	David Hutchinson
	Jeff House	Carol Blazina
	JoAnn Chmielowski	

Questions/Topics to Consider

- What is the current perception of the city's image by its residents? By visitors?

- What are the characteristics of Oneonta that should be emphasized when promoting the city's image? What characteristics need significant improvement to improve the city's image?

- What constitutes our attraction as a regional destination? How would we like to see that change/improve in the future?

- How can we make our gateways, such as Route 7 or James Lettis Highway, more welcoming and attractive? What can be done to improve the city's image from the vantage point of I-88?

- How can we make Downtown more attractive and easier to navigate? How can we improve the ease of movement for visitors, without compromising the quality of life for residents? Considerations include wayfinding signage, parking, road networks, visual clarity and visual appeal.

- What physical or aesthetic improvements should be considered city-wide, especially in the commercial districts, neighborhoods, and gateways to the community?

- To what degree does our aging housing stock impact our attractiveness to visitors and potential residents?

Focus Group 1—Destination & Image

Focus Group Results

Current Perception by Locals
- Excellent quality of life
    - -Safe community
    - -Good proximity to services
    - -Walkable/bikeable
    - -3 libraries
    - -Excellent park system
    - -Bus system is great
    - -Good school system
- Cultural destination, plenty of things to do for every age group
- Pedestrian friendly
- Bikeable but not bike friendly (compact community but very few bicycle accommodations)
- Increasing student nuisances in Center City
- Friendliness, openness
- Clean air
- Senior housing is available — not in Downtown, but the bus system serves it well
- Main Street underserves seniors
- Attractive — quaint neighborhoods with tree lined streets
- Housing stock is relatively healthy, dilapidated houses are not concentrated
- Gradual increase of families moving back into Center City
- Great vistas

Focus Group 1—Destination & Image

Current Perception by Non-Locals
- Shopping/retail center for the county and region
- Cultural destination, though image could be strengthened
- College town
- A slice of Americana — small town with a traditional Main Street
- Sports tourists (from Halls of Fame, sports camps) are pleasantly surprised by Downtown

What Should Oneonta's Image Be?
- There are so many different assets, no single draw stands out
- Market city as a place with multiple attractions
    - Sports
    - Arts/Cultural
    - Higher education
    - Excellent parks
    - Natural beauty (river and hills)
    - Small town with excellent quality of life
    - The best pizza around!
- Process of self-determination should be a slow process

What Issues Hinder Achieving this Image?
- No grocery store in the City
- There are fewer students living off campus, but there are still plenty of nuisance issues
- The community exports their children ("the brain drain"), both high school and college age
- Lack of cooperation between City and Town governments — they work against each other — consider consolidation
- Traffic problems — congestion along state highways
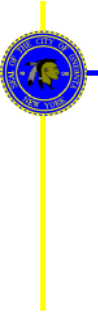
Focus Group 1—Destination & Image

- Perception of lack of parking
- Too much truck traffic

Suggestions/Recommendations
- Tourism draw needs to be more effectively promoted
- Need for a local tourism body — City Chamber of Commerce may be more beneficial than County Chamber
- Need for a comprehensive community calendar (online) — too many groups maintain their own calendars, better coordination could improve tourism numbers
- Provide free public pools
- Coordinate Downtown business hours with events such as the Tuesday night film festivals
- Create parking plan that makes it easier to find parking downtown (including promotional materials — "Parking, its not as far as you think!")
- Support wayfinding signage study that is currently underway
- Improvements to James Lettis and Main Street gateway
    - -better directional signage
    - -more plantings, beautification
    - -ensure that buildings around intersection are preserved — developers hope to build gas station and/or drug store at that location — this is too important of a gateway and such development would ruin the image of the community
- Hunt Street adjacent to P.O. desperately needs improvements — has a negative impact on appearance of gateway
- Improve lighting at Exit 15, better landscaping and cleanup
- Improve landscaping around parking lots — visual buffer
- Need to advertise attractions better along I-88
- Encourage college employees to get involved in the community — rarely see them supporting businesses downtown
- For revitalization to occur, each resident must support local businesses!

Focus Group 2—Economic Health & Revitalization

Facilitators	Participants	
Andrew Raus & Kevin Kelley,	Jim Berkovitz	Ron Rank
Clark Patterson Associates	Joan Fox	Bob Turrell
	Helene Seldin	Susan Hughson
	Jean Ostrowski	

Questions/Topics to Consider

- What kinds of businesses (i.e. arts/cultural, retail, sporting goods, manufacturing, restaurants, etc.) should the city work to attract? How can Oneonta attract professionals, skilled labor, and other non-service related jobs to the community?

- How can Downtown and other commercial parts of the city compete with the general retail presence in the Town of Oneonta?

- What areas of the City should be considered for attracting new businesses/industries or encouraging "infill" development?

- Are there additional ways for the community to take advantage of the presence of college students and tourists? Is there greater potential in those resources?

- How can we avoid the "brain drain" and retain college students post-graduation?

- What tools are available to offset the burden of high taxes (whether perceived or actual)? What incentives can be used to attract businesses?

- Like most communities, there is a vein of pessimism that runs through Oneonta. How can we promote sustainable community pride, specifically in terms of economic health and revitalization? What are specific actions that can help restore optimism to citizens?

Focus Group 2—Economic Health & Revitalization

Focus Group Results

What is Economic Health & Revitalization?
- Successful business climate
- Economic diversity and vitality
- Good paying jobs — keep people here
- Healthy population (physical, economical, mental)
- Diverse mix of age groups
- Small business opportunities (mom and pop stores)
- Retail opportunities
- Diversity in population
- Friendly business climate
- Housing — new development (all types), quality, affordability, choices
- Appearance of downtown — needs to be attractive
- Need for new businesses, many are outdated
- Maintaining families in the city
- Having neighborhood commercial, such as Woody's

How Does it Relate to Oneonta?
- Loitering downtown impacts perception of safety — need to provide job/skills training to youth
- Need for more retail
- Downtown development coordinator needs to be more proactive, responsibilities needs to be more focused
- Not enough affordable housing options
- Current zoning code doesn't help attract developers — already missed a great opportunity for a mixed-use building
- Potential for development in rail yards

Focus Group 2—Economic Health & Revitalization

What Kinds of Businesses are Appropriate for Downtown?
- Specialty items (gifts, crafts, etc.)
- Need more restaurants
- College bookstore/gift shop
- Hours that compliment the film festival
- Clothing store
- Grocery store
- Internet café
- Medical supply to compliment hospital
- Research collaboratives with colleges
- Primary anchor, whether retail, entertainment, or mixed-use building
- Need to attract local, independent businesses not national chains
- Need to tap into colleges as a resource — i.e. music industry program
- Antique stores compliment each other and support surrounding businesses
- Eastern religions/philosophies are big in the region — potential market to be tapped

Other Opportunities and Considerations
- Foot Hills PAC could include a conference center
- Pursue grant resources and private investment, as well as efficiency of review process
- Need to support existing businesses
- No consistent promotion of "spend local" except at Christmas
- Take advantage of sports tourism
- Establish critical mass, promote community pride
- Who is defining Oneonta's future? Is it purely the market and the actions of developers, or does the community have a say?

Focus Group 2—Economic Health & Revitalization

- Statewide problem of maintaining and attracting employers
- Conflict between Town and City may be contributing to lost opportunities in the city
- Too many tax exempt properties — town residents use these facilities but don't contribute to the tax base, similar problem with City services
- Need to promote Golden Artist paints and soap rocks on a community website
- Growing Environmental Sciences program at Hartwick and SUNY Oneonta — create incubator space for R&D of green technologies, green practices, sustainable living — would need a primary promoter and partnership with the City
- Need for indoor ice rink, could be combined with indoor soccer into one facility

Focus Group 3—Quality of Life

Facilitators	Participants	
Andrew Raus,	Susan Kurkowski	Terry Capuano
Clark Patterson Associates	Jane Grastorf	Dan Maskin
	Jacki Hunt	Jim Baldo
	Grace Smith	Jody Quarles
	Matthew Brown	Kate O'Donnell

Questions/Topics to Consider

- What businesses or amenities are lacking in Oneonta that would make the city a more attractive place to live, work, do business, and raise a family?

- What actions can be taken to build upon the positive impacts of the colleges? What can be done to reduce the negative impacts of the colleges?

- How can we make Oneonta a cleaner, safer place to live in and visit? What initiatives can be taken beyond what the police department is responsible for?

- As the arts and cultural community becomes more prominent, and as more people are drawn to Main Street, how can we address perceived safety levels and the problem of loitering in Downtown?

- What are some ways to improve/increase the recreational activities for the city's youth? Suggestions for activities should address a variety of interests, such as music, sports, and community participation.

- What improvements are appropriate to help make Oneonta a more walkable and bikeable community? Consider this issue in terms of commuting and day-to-day trips, not just leisure and recreation.

- What steps can be taken to reduce the community's energy consumption?

- Are there opportunities for human services organizations, such as not-for-profits, churches, senior citizen groups, etc., to improve efficiency through collaborative efforts?

Focus Group 3—Quality of Life

Focus Group Results

Indicators
- Family friendly
- Safety
- Public services (fire, municipal, etc.), private services (doctors, shops, etc.)
- Cultural enrichment
- Adequate affordable housing
- Recreation for all ages
- Fair tax base
- Good schools
- Environmental quality
- Peaceful
- Diversity of population
- Functional infrastructure
- Historic structures
- Jobs
- Business friendly government

Family Friendly
- Many religious organizations with youth programs
- Networking is taking place at youth/teen activities — church, dances, etc.
- Lacking after school opportunities for teens
- YMCA does not cater to teens

Focus Group 3—Quality of Life

- Student housing, rentals, and transients breaks up the cohesiveness of neighborhoods in Central City area
- Loitering on Main St — many are teens and kids
- Empty nesters/seniors have some social opportunities
- Need for teen parents services

Safety
- Vandalism
- Burglary
- Public drunkenness
- Random violence and violence associated with drinking
- Police bike/foot patrols are great
- Pedestrian safety at crosswalks needs to be more consistent
- James Lettis/Main St intersection is not safe for pedestrians
- Bike lanes are needed
- Enforcement of sidewalk snow removal — should be the City's responsibility
- Increase size of police force — offset high cost of OT
- Integrate students into the community — "partners"

Services
- Daily needs retail — no grocery store downtown
- Lack of support for local retail
- Need more child care services, especially for low and moderate incomes

Focus Group 3—Quality of Life

Housing - Diversity
- Need for adequate affordable housing
- "New Housing" types
- Aging stock, lack of maintenance
- Adequate "workforce" housing opportunities
- Senior housing needs to be better integrated with community services
- Limited land available for development
- Zoning not effective in reducing allowances for transient housing (summer rentals)

Recreation for all ages
- Teens need more affordable opportunities
- Community center may be warranted
- Senior recreation opportunities should be reviewed
- More walking trails
- Indoor walking — maybe SUCO Alumni Field House, maybe other school facilities

Fair Tax Base
- Charge fee to not-for-profits for use of services
- Downtown fee for maintenance/improvements to Main St (Business Improvement District)

Environmental Quality
- Wood burning facility — current plan would use 25% of city's potable water supply
- Need for sustainable energy practices
- Land at colleges helps keep city green
- Use river for recreation — greenway

Focus Group 3—Quality of Life

Diversity of Population
- Oneontans youth leave, don't come back
- Lack of racial diversity
- Changing population makeup — more Latinos

Infrastructure
- City is doing an adequate job with sidewalk maintenance
- Pursue free city-wide wireless internet access

Historic Structures
- Need for protection/recognition of all historic structures throughout the city

Focus Group 4—Downtown

Facilitator	Participants	
Tim Hayes,	Ed May	Gary Bonebrake
SUNY Oneonta	Tom Clemow	Ed Lorenz
	Anna Tomaino	Kathie Greenblatt
	Vincenzo Avanzato	Antonia Avanzato
	Mark Montfort	Michael Shea

Questions/Topics to Consider

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of Downtown?

- What physical/aesthetic improvements should be considered to make Downtown more functional and attractive? Consider both public and private spaces.

- How can Downtown better compete with the general retail presence in the Town of Oneonta? How can the City work with the Town to ensure decisions are made with the health of the region in mind?

- Are there opportunities to increase the number of residential units in Downtown, following the trend in cities throughout the U.S.?

- What types of products and services are missing from Main Street and the surrounding area? How can we attract these kinds of businesses?

- Is Downtown considered a walkable or bikeable destination by the surrounding neighborhoods and the colleges? If not, what can be done to improve the physical connections to Main Street?

- As the arts and cultural community becomes more prominent, and as more people are drawn to Main Street, how can we address perceived safety levels and the problem of loitering in Downtown?

Focus Group 4—Downtown

## Focus Group Results

Defining Downtown

Downtown was defined as being within the area of Market Street from the corner of Main and Fairview streets to James Georgeson/Gas Ave; Main Street just north of the viaduct turning west on Chestnut Street to the old P&C plaza, including the United Methodist Church; Huntington Park turning north along Dietz Street to Walnut Street, which serves as Downtown's northern border; and Main Street to the Maple Street/Lettis Highway intersection, excluding the cemetery.

Distinctions
- Pedestrian flow
- Mood
- Activity
- Connected to Center City by Elm St
- Has a little bit of everything — eateries, library, movie theater, banks, specialty shops, market
- A place to see other people

Strengths of Downtown
- Attractive
- Unique — "they don't have Main Streets in the suburbs"
- Recent work to keep storefronts clean is commendable, but some storefronts could still use some work
- City workers occasionally sweep Main Street, but are often cleaning up after college students
- Kim K. Muller Plaza is an excellent meeting place
- Colleges are an asset, despite the negative impacts — the pros outweigh the cons
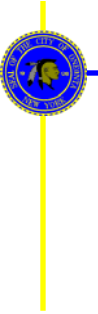
Focus Group 4—Downtown

- Personable feeling
- Welcoming community spirit
- Personal place with individualized service, trust and positive reputation
- A place of comfort — church bells add to this feeling
- Walkable, highly mobile
- Free parking
- Good transportation network — Oneonta Public Transit serves Main Street well
- Downtown is "fighting Southside" but it is different and capable of besting "big box stores" with quality, diverse selection of products and services (including cultural and religious destinations) and customer service
- Anchors aren't destination stores, but opportunities
  - -cultural anchors — movie theater, Orpheus, Foothills, Catskill Choral Society, Oneonta Concert Association, other music scene
  - -food anchors: pizza, cafes

Weaknesses of Downtown
- Clarion has a "cardboard façade" that's already falling apart
- Responsibility for creating and prolonging the weaknesses of downtown is seen in four areas: government, individual businesses, college students, and systemic regional factors
- Perception is that City government sets low standards and expectations that are easy to reach and popular, if not at least drawing the least criticism
- No official parking for residents of downtown apartments
- Perception of knee-jerk moratoria in response to the cries of a few noisy individuals
- Difficulty competing with Southside — "People are trained to go to the Mall"
- Individual owners, and possibly a collective that may include the county's Chamber of Commerce, must market to youth and regular shoppers as well as potential building tenants
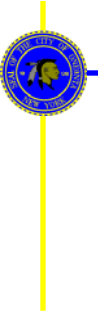
Focus Group 4—Downtown

- Some storefronts are run down, unattractive, and depressing
- So-called "band-aid" fixes for vacant shops, such as window painting and cultural displays, are not a good response
- More can be done to make Downtown clean — the mall has a cleaning staff
- Some absentee landlords don't seem to care
- Hours of operation do not serve a modern market — at night, there's a feeling like on Halloween — "the lights are off, there's no one home and we're all out of candy"
- "Brain drain", loss of young people in general — in general, the city is not attractive even for local youth to return after college
- Perceived lack of quality, well-paying jobs
- Perception among older residents and outsiders that Downtown is dangerous (e.g. Elm Street where the college students travel to and from campus)
- Excessive drinking by college students, exacerbated by student apartments on or near Main Street
- "Noise" from opposition groups in governmental proceedings rules over the public good, professionalism and the City's vision

Strategies to improve Oneonta must support positive perception of colleges and the opportunities they afford.

Strategies for Downtown
- Bike racks
- Public restrooms on Main Street, especially for summertime visitors
- Lighting and other visual improvements to Lettis Highway access off I-88
- Painting street lines in the spring rather than fall so they're bright all summer
- A billboard and maps promoting Downtown – potentially at Southside locations
- Prominent signage that says, "Glad to Have You"
- Clean up Main Street and the rest will fall in line

Focus Group 4—Downtown

- Prevent buses from idling in front of retail spaces at Clinton Plaza
- Build elevators to upper-floor buildings to increase access and expand the market for these spaces
- A kiosk calling attention to local events (even though the Regional Visitors Center exists in the Telecenter on Main Street)
- Remind churchgoers of "services before services" – places they can go on Sunday before or after church
- Narrated walking tours for visitors and improved signage at street corners to show where businesses are
- A summer reading list with posters for each book placed in different Downtown storefronts
- Recipes with local ingredients in windows
- Saturday Volkmarch – a planned walking route beginning and ending at Farmers' Market with prizes for most miles walked
- Bodega/deli Downtown so people who live there can get everyday items (milk, bread and other staples)
- Youth Center to attract kids downtown, but not loitering
- Free OPT bus passes or free weeks to encourage resident use of bus system and trolley
- Promote Downtown to both newcomers (college students, faculty, prospective businesses) and existing residents, but not just one-shot events or promotions

How City Government can Help
- Well-funded staff and office for Downtown Developer
- Vision of Downtown and sticking to strategies to improve it
- Seminars to create professionals/professionalism on City government boards
- Pay City board members for meeting attendance
- Improved police foot patrol/presence and have/enforce no loitering law
- Establish a retail tax district to support services like sweeping, snow removal or heated sidewalks
- Train business owners on window dressings and displays
- Increase parking fines

Focus Group 4—Downtown

- Tax breaks given equally for projects meeting Vision
- Expanded sewer/water to exceed future demand
- Find ways for small shops to cost/customer share in a mini-mall concept

Other Ideas...
- Eliminate the "not my problem" mentality by finding out who is ultimately responsible, or finding someone to do it
- City, Town and colleges need to recognize and address common problems with mutually beneficial solutions
- Consider once again merging the City and Town
- Cost advantage currently favors individuals in the Town — the City could only force the issue economically by charging those outside the City limits for services such as parks and parking as well as dramatically increasing water and sewer rates
- Need to take action beyond simply studying the problems
- "Retired-in-place" officials need to do something or leave
- Ultimately, market-based solutions rule the day

Focus Group 5—Administration & Government

Facilitator	Participants	
Barry Warren,	Brett Fisk	Marge O'Mara
SUNY Oneonta	Kay Stuligross	Peter Paluch
	Kim Muller	Karl Seeley
	Bob Mansbach	Marge Merzig
	Peter Macris	John Anderson
	David Brenner	

Questions/Topics to Consider

- Are there ways that the structure of local government can be streamlined or reorganized, for the sake of efficiency and/or improving the effectiveness of its working relationship with citizens?

- Is there overlap in the responsibility/effort of the City's various boards and commissions (planning, zoning, etc.)? Are they successful in serving the public and improving the efficiency of the review process, appeals, and general discourse?

- How would you rate the government's effectiveness in communication and interaction with citizens? Consider things such as press releases, newsletters, website, public meeting notices, etc.

- What are the negative ramifications of a "less than perfect" relationship between the City of Oneonta and Town of Oneonta governments? What needs to be done to improve this relationship?

- What elements of the city's physical infrastructure (sidewalks, roads, parks, lighting, landscaping, etc.) are in need of an upgrade?

- What City services (garbage, police, fire, communication, library, etc.) need the most improvement?

- What community facilities, such as libraries, an ice rink, or a community center, should the City consider developing or at least improving?

Focus Group 5—Administration & Government

## Focus Group Results

General Thoughts

- Developing a shared community vision in Oneonta is very difficult
- Often, when a vision has been articulated by government leaders, there has been a lack of political ability to realize this vision
- Setting a community vision and acting upon it is very challenging, as summarized in the topics below

The Absence of a Strong Executive Authority in Government

- Current government structure is fragmented with Common Council having primary authority under the City Charter
- The Mayor has only limited authority in terms of legislation and some executive responsibilities
- Department heads formally report to the Mayor, but the Mayor lacks authority to fire or hire any City Hall personnel
- This triangulation of responsibility and authority leads to confusion and lack of focus with regard to implementing government actions on a consistent basis

Governing to the Least Common Denominator of Civic Happiness

- Local government too often has tried to promote initiatives and maintain services to please the largest number of citizens — a safe approach, but one which negatively impacts the governing process
- Typically, the Mayor has taken a city-wide view of his/her role, but the Common Council and department heads tend to focus primarily on the process of government and the narrow responsibilities of government (e.g. sidewalk, leaf pickup, and road repair)
- This pattern is reflective of the fact that the Aldermen have more authority and are thus able to gain attention for the work they perform on behalf of their Wards
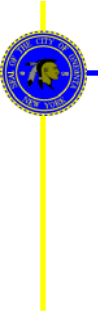
Focus Group 5—Administration & Government

A Weak Civic Culture in the Community
- This culture shows little engagement except in negative terms
- Local "grassroots" politics emerges on a periodic basis to oppose development projects, but rarely in support of community-wide initiatives
- A strong NIMBY philosophy serves to discourage major economic development and housing projects within the city limits
- There exists a high degree of mistrust between business and government, and the entrepreneurial spirit suffers
- Most economic growth is among already established businesses or nonprofit organizations
- Tension between government, residents and the business sector regarding economic development may have diminished commitment to community

Need to Focus on Projects that Build Community
- This will strengthen the civic culture
- Many Oneontans value the participatory environment that Oneonta affords — citizens utilize parks, the ballpark, arts events, sporting events at the Colleges, celebrations downtown
- Given his environment, it would be wise to build on other events that will generate community engagement
- This approach could generate greater appreciation for and celebration of the broader community

The Executive Branch of City Government Must be Strengthened
- This will make government a more viable partner in the community and in economic development
- Under the current City Charter, the Mayor has little formal authority
- Charter reform could create a strong Mayor form of government, then all facets of City operations would be under the control of the Mayor
- Enhance the overall accountability of department heads to the Mayor
- City Council could then assume a more traditional role in the consideration and passage of legislation

Focus Group 5—Administration & Government

- Under a strong executive, City government could move projects forward more efficiently and in a more timely fashion with respect to downtown development, rail yard development, promotion of senior housing and affordable housing, etc.

Encourage More City/Town Cooperation
- Efforts are needed to confront some of the barriers to cooperation and innovation between the city and the town
- These include lack of communication between government officials and lack of a formal process to identify areas for cooperation (e.g. sharing of resources)