

# Town of Lake George Smart Growth Assessment Project Implementation

Partners: Town of Lake George;  
Glens Falls Hospital, Health Promotion Center; Genius Loci Planning

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## **Introduction**

This report presents two opportunities for the town of Lake George to improve its connectivity for non-motorized travel, which in turn will contribute positive impacts for the community's future. The first centers on a section of the unused right of way owned by National Grid and located in the village, and the second focuses on the Prospect Mountain access road which makes the important connection over the Northway.

## **Project Background**

In 2014, the town of Lake George partnered with the Glens Falls Hospital Health Promotion Center (HPC) to undertake a Smart Growth Assessment Project. The HPC is the regional contractor of the NYS Department of Health Creating Healthy Places to Live, Work and Play Program, as well as several related programs. The HPC partners with communities in Warren and Washington Counties and, within the land use context, has helped build strong alliances resulting in numerous municipal policy adoptions and capital improvements in the areas of Complete Streets and Smart Growth.

The Smart Growth Assessment Project <sup>1</sup> was intended to examine the town of Lake George's land use regulations and make recommendations for smart growth and related improvements. While the project fulfilled this purpose, several factors contributed to an adjustment of the project scope to better suit the town's needs. These factors included: the town's regulations are fairly well developed in terms guiding growth wisely; the town operates within a "highly regulated" area which includes the regulatory jurisdictions of the Adirondack Park Agency and the Lake George Park Commission; the town, as of 2014, has been updating its comprehensive plan and this process presented opportunities for the assessment project to complement and enhance the plan; and, the town's land use regulations could be improved to be more user-friendly and clearer on procedures and requirements. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, the town has several opportunities to improve physical connections for pedestrians, hikers, and cyclists, enhance Complete Streets principles and practices, and weave related advantages into its identity as a destination for active lifestyles. These opportunities are noted in the assessment report and backed by recommendations that are reinforced by the directions suggested in this implementation summary.

Completion of the Smart Growth Assessment Report helped the town become eligible for additional technical assistance for implementation of the recommendations. The town then created another agreement with the HPC for Genius Loci Planning to provide technical assistance. This assistance focused on the two potential projects discussed here, and although the assistance was not extensive, it builds upon the earlier work and is supportive of the still-developing comprehensive plan. It is also important to note that \$7000 in state funding was provided to the town for capital improvements related to building healthy communities. The town used this funding to purchase a large piece of playground equipment for Usher Park.

## The National Grid Right of Way

In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a trolley line was built between Lake George and Warrensburg. This complemented the Lake George Branch of the Delaware and Hudson Railroad, built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Today, and since 1978, the old railroad grade is known as the Warren County Bikeway and is one of the region's greatest outdoor recreation attractions. To the north, the former trolley, owned by National Grid and unused for public transportation, remains largely intact. The abandoned line occupies a strategic location, both in terms of potential for greater regional connectivity and -- in the village section -- as a means to alleviate congestion and provide safe travel alternatives for non-motorized users.

In exploring possibilities for future use, the town has placed a focus on the section of right of way that runs from the current town offices south to the northern terminus of Cooper Street, a distance of approximately 1000'. A look at the street pattern in this area reveals that the right of way completes a section of the street grid by connecting two cul-de-sacs -- the second being that of the Old Post Road at the location of the town offices.

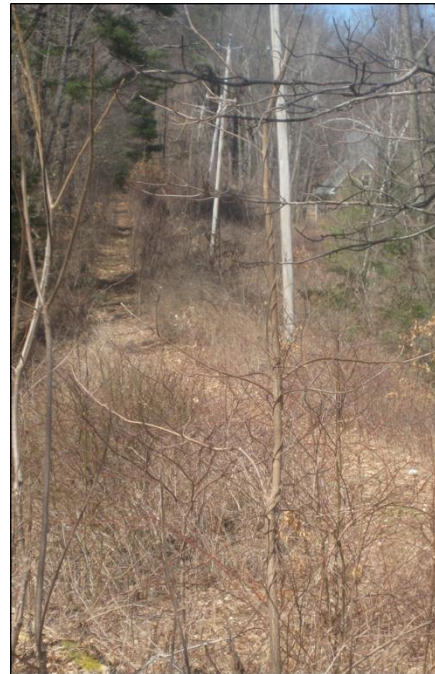


If this right of way became usable by the public it would accomplish several things:

- Facilitate non-motorized travel, not only between the two cul-de-sac streets, but between the groups of neighborhood streets that are attached to each of these cul-de-sacs;
- Encourage more recreation, exercise and non-motorized activities and contribute to Lake George's existing reputation and future vision of a destination where people can enjoy a wide range of activities without a car (see Assessment Report);
- Alleviate congestion in the downtown area, by offering an alternative means of travel, especially during tourist season;
- Complement the existing trail opportunities in and around Lake George, e.g. the pedestrian bridge over the Northway that connects the village (at nearby Smith Street) with large tracts of state land;
- Serve as an impetus to undertake use of the right of way north of the village. In greenway planning and implementation, success with one key section can build momentum for extension;
- It would show accomplishment of a positive project implemented by a dedicated group of people (see Assessment Report).

There are some primary characteristics of this project that the town must be aware of:

- The property lies in the village, so cooperation with the village at some level is mandatory;
- The right of way is owned by National Grid, who sets the rules for any proposed public uses of their right of ways;
- The project entails a significant amount of investment and dedication on the part of the town and, as involved, the village. For example, a survey of the property is required, the costs of which are the responsibility of the party(ies) seeking use of the property;
- The southern end of the right away touches (according to the Warren County GIS Parcel Viewer) but does not create an extended connection with the northern edge of Cooper Street. The specifics of this relationship require further examination, as do any needed means for creating a proper connection.



*Looking north from Cooper St. along the right of way*

National Grid has provided assistance and information for the project to be pursued. This information has been provided to the town and each document is referenced by title at the end of this report.<sup>2</sup> While primary steps in further exploring the project would be meetings, first between town and village officials, and then with National Grid

representatives, the inclusion of the proposed project in the town's comprehensive plan is an important initial consideration.

### **Role of the Comprehensive Plan**

It is fairly well known that the town's comprehensive planning process, begun in 2014, has been challenging at times. This is not uncommon. Unfortunately, non-controversial and widely accepted goals and objectives of a draft plan often become forestalled at the expense of the ongoing resolution of the "hot button" issues. In similar instances, portions of a draft plan are removed wholesale as revised language is considered. And on further occasion, revisions may supplant and significantly alter the nature of previous language. While this latter situation might be viewed as a necessary step, it presents difficulties because the comprehensive planning process becomes more akin to periodic overhaul rather than one of incremental progression and ongoing consensus building.

The smart growth assessment project sought to align itself with relevant recommendations being developed in the draft comprehensive plan. For example, the town adopted a Complete Streets policy in 2014. The draft of the comprehensive plan active in early 2015 built upon this policy. However, language was amended in the August 2015 (current) draft to exclude numerous references to the term Complete Streets in the plan's recommendations section. Likewise, advancement of the West Side of Lake George Trails Master Plan and the focus on the Route 9 Gateway Corridor redevelopment – both emphasized in the Assessment Report recommendations -- have been de-emphasized in the current draft of the comprehensive plan.

The purpose of this discussion is to encourage the town board to focus on what are perceived to be positive and less controversial recommendations for implementation. The smart growth assessment project had the advantage of an outside perspective, and it focused and highlighted several positive attributes and resources of the town, putting forth suggestions for strengthening these for the future. Of course one of the most effective ways to reinforce the threads of progression is to include associated recommendations in the comprehensive plan, where they become adopted as town policy. Given the swings in the comprehensive planning process and the fluctuation in the revisions of the document, the smart growth assessment report should be reexamined for the relationships between its recommendations and those of the comprehensive plan.

Use of the former trolley line as an extension of the Warren County Bikeway is mentioned on p. 66 of the current draft of the comprehensive plan under the heading of 'Promote Improved Pedestrian & Bicycle Access.' This is the section of the plan where the right of way can be included, perhaps something along the lines of 'Explore non-motorized use of the right of way owned by National Grid between Cooper Street and the town offices and in other locations.' Indeed, this right of way can play an important role in extending the Bikeway. Inter-municipal cooperation, another aspect of comprehensive planning, was suggested during the assessment project, with specific mention of the town of Warrensburg. Comprehensive planners should consider the

incorporation of related language, as it may spur cooperation for utilizing the trolley line for recreation.

### **Prospect Mountain - Access Improvements**

Given that the Adirondack Park is largely defined by the state's vast landholdings, it follows that the economic health of the Park's communities is largely linked to the connections between these outdoor resources and the people who come to the region to enjoy them. In many ways Lake George serves as the gateway to the Park, and the town and village have been successful in reinforcing the sense of place that is largely driven by outdoor recreation. With success comes exposure of the challenges that limit further strengthening of connections between people and public land resources.

The construction of the Northway, while redefining access to the Adirondacks, also brought local effects that communities continue to address. The town of Lake George is bifurcated by the Northway. The majority of vehicular movement across the highway takes place via Exit 21 (Route 9N) and Exit 22, with the latter being more of an on- and off ramp, rather than a connecting thoroughfare. The third vehicular crossing of the Northway is the Prospect Mountain Highway, which is essentially a sole-purpose road for access to the mountain. Given these and other limitations in the town's transportation geography (e.g. the lake), it is critical for the town to maximize the use of existing facilities and to explore new opportunities for doing so. Fortunately, the town also has a pedestrian bridge that passes over the Northway, as well as an underpass at Big Hollow Road. Nevertheless, the limitations posed by the Prospect Mountain access road should become a focal area for instituting improved access opportunities, as there are numerous benefits of increasing public use. Language to this effect is found in the Smart Growth Assessment Report and it should be included in the developing comprehensive plan.

For this implementation phase, a particular aspect of enhancing use of the access road was examined. However, it should be kept in mind that any planning goals and concerns of the town regarding the Prospect Mountain unit should be part of the larger and necessary dialogue with NYSDEC. The map below illustrates the potential of the Prospect Mountain access road to better serve connectivity needs of the community. In the upper right, an extension of Gage Road currently connects to and crosses the access road (providing access to the wastewater treatment plant). In the lower left, is the Lake George Recreation Center, which has its access from Route 9 N to the south.

Connecting these resources for pedestrians and cyclists via the access road should be a stated objective of the town. In the current situation, using the example of a youth with a bicycle who's on a soccer or baseball team, the only means of travelling between the residential streets in the upper right and the ballfields in the lower left is to use the extremely busy and cyclist unfriendly Routes 9 and 9N; or get a ride in a car.



Opening access from the Gage Rd. extension to a point west of the gatehouse along the access road could be accomplished by moving the gate that is currently on the east side of the Northway to a location near or west of the gatehouse. Such an arrangement would not affect the entry to the Prospect Mountain access road on Route 9. There are numerous options to be explored that can restrict vehicles while allowing pedestrians and cyclists. Additional possibilities for connection include access from the cul-de-sac developments and the National Grid right of way, both shown on the above map. Essentially, implementing increased use of the access road will help offset the effects of an automobile dependent environment, as characterized by the bisecting Northway and its busy exits, the sprawled development of Route 9, and the unconnected nature of the triple cul-de-sac subdivision. Connecting the street grid pattern of the village with the municipal park is an action that exercises Complete Streets and Smart Growth principles. It is also important to note that the State of New York, to some fanfare, recently acquired the 1436-acre Berry Pond Tract, reinforcing the sizeable expanse of recreational lands in the western portion of the town and beyond. Also important is that there are existing trail and road connections connecting the access road with state and

town lands on the west side of the Northway, and some of these are currently used for snowmobile access.

Implementing enhanced connectivity via the Prospect Mountain access road should begin with a dialogue between local officials and the NYSDEC. As part of the implementation phase of this project, the NYSDEC was contacted to initiate this partnership dialogue. The results of these attempts at communication were abysmal due to the DEC's inaction. The resources of the forest preserve belong to the people of the State of New York, and further, the agency staff charged with managing these resources and communicating with local communities is



*Looking south toward the town recreation area from the Prospect Mountain access road*

funded by taxpayers. Therefore, the severe lack of a meaningful and productive response on the part of NYSDEC Region 5 should be considered unacceptable. The town should consider a remedy to this situation carefully and proceed unwaveringly to a solution, as the DEC-local partnership is of utmost importance to well-being and future of the area's communities. The state should be embracing the concepts put forth as means to enhance the enjoyment of the resources it manages and to promote safety in the adjacent community.

As with other recommendations in the Smart Growth Assessment Report, the town should integrate language in the comprehensive plan to advance the steps needed to realize improved access utilizing the Prospect Mountain access road.

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<sup>1</sup> Smart Growth Assessment Project Towns of Fort Edward and Lake George. February 2015. Genius Loci Planning.

<sup>2</sup> 1. Letter from Halina Gajewski, National Grid. April 2015.

2. Recreational Trails FAQs. National Grid.

3. Recreational Trails Policy. National Grid.

4. Conditions for Proposed Activities Within Transmission Lines Rights-of-Way. National Grid. July 18, 2014.

5. Sample Plan Profile.

6. Specifications for Work by Others on National Grid Rights-of-Way Containing Gas Facilities

7. National Grid Application for Third Party Occupation Agreement.