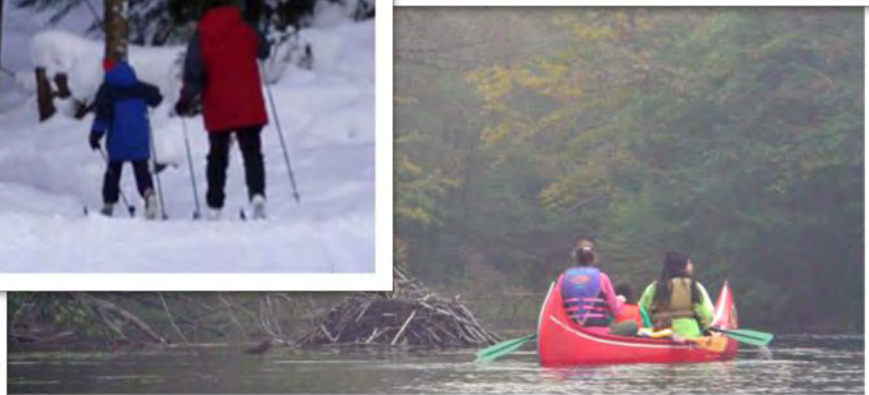
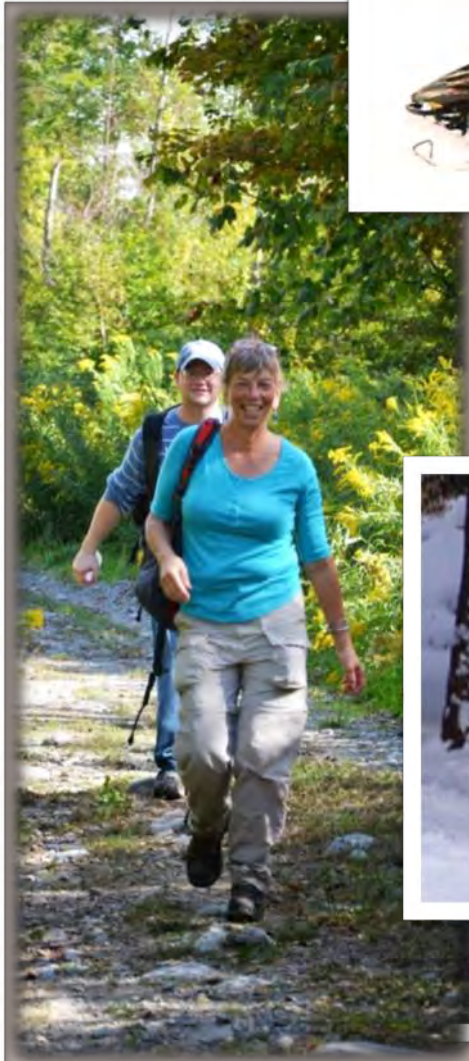


Rensselaer Plateau Regional Trail Vision Plan



July 2015

Rensselaer Plateau Alliance
Conservation Through Community

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

This Trail Vision Plan is phase I of a two-phase project to develop an implementable plan for trail development on the Rensselaer Plateau. Phase I was intended to bring all plateau municipalities, landowners, recreation organizations, and the public together to create a vision for a future network of trails. The Vision Plan would address important questions and concerns (landowner rights, liability, trail management and maintenance, etc.), and identify and prioritize opportunities for short-term and longer-term projects that will lead to the realization of the regional trails vision. The Rensselaer Plateau Alliance received a grant from the New York State Hudson River Valley Greenway for the Trail Vision Plan. The Hudson River Valley Greenway is program created by New York State to facilitate the development of a regional strategy for preserving scenic, natural, historic, cultural and recreational resources while encouraging compatible economic development and maintaining the tradition of home rule for land use decision-making.¹ Phase II will illustrate the envisioned future trail network (including alternatives as appropriate). This plan utilizes graphics and photos to help convey the potential of this network as a recreational and economic asset to the Plateau and the region. Next step are identified and prioritized, and details about how the project could be accomplished, including responsibilities, partnerships and sources of funding, are included. This document will be distributed widely to inspire action by communities and organizations across the Plateau.

The Rensselaer Plateau Alliance (RPA) is a diverse group of organizations and people who live on or near the Plateau with interests to conserve the qualities and character of this region and the benefits it provides. The RPA seeks to work cooperatively with municipalities, groups, and residents to help educate and promote actions that protect the environmental and economic values provided by the Plateau for the long term.

The Rensselaer Plateau Alliance is a non-for-profit organization that started in 2006 as a group of interested people representing landowners, local organizations, and recreational users. The RPA has 32 alliance member organizations including the very large and very small and ranging from recreational groups such as horseback riding, cycling and snowmobile clubs to sportsman clubs, lake associations, forest owner association and environmental organizations. The RPA's mission is to:

Work with the community to promote and facilitate the conservation of the Rensselaer Plateau's undeveloped and unfragmented forests and other ecologically important areas.

The RPA's 2014 Strategic Goals included:

- Conserve Unbroken Forests & Ecologically Important Areas
- Expand Education, Outreach & Communication
- Establish the Plateau as a Recreational Destination
- Establish a Community Forest for the People
- Increase Organizational Capacity

¹ Hudson River Valley Greenway Mission Statement found at:
<http://hudsongreenway.ny.gov/AbouttheGreenway/OverviewandMission.aspx>

About the Plateau

The Rensselaer Plateau is one of the largest and most ecologically intact native habitats in New York State. The Plateau covers about 118,000 acres in the towns of Berlin, Brunswick, Grafton, Hoosick, Nassau, Petersburg, Pittstown, Poestenkill, Sand Lake, Stephentown and the Village of East Nassau. According to the 2010 US Census, there are approximately 8,250 living on the Plateau. There are approximately 4,070 housing units, 5,200 property owners and 5,900 parcels of land. More than 90% of the land on the Rensselaer Plateau is privately owned and about 10% is permanently protected from development. The State of New York is the second largest landowner on the Plateau (approx. 8,500 acres).²

Land uses on the Plateau are dominated by vacant land and residential land uses, followed by wild, forested, conservation lands and public parks.³ Business and employment opportunities on the Plateau are most common in the food and drinking establishment industry followed by forest products, tourism and recreation, agriculture and mining.⁴



Fifth Largest Forest in NYS and Unique Geological Formation⁵

The boreal forests of the plateau contain the headwaters of seven watersheds. Four drain into the Hudson River below the Troy Dam. Three of the northeast sections drain into the Hoosick River then into the Hudson River in Stillwater. Other waters feed the Tomhannock Reservoir (the public water supply for much of the county).

An escarpment steeply rising from the surrounding lower elevations marks the Plateau's boundary. The Plateau's relatively high elevations (1,000 – 1,800 feet) and cool climate, acidic soils, and its poor drainage contribute to plants, forests, and wetlands more similar to the northern forests than to the surrounding

² Rensselaer Plateau Alliance, *Rensselaer Plateau Regional Conservation Plan* (2013) p.17

³ Ibid p. 20

⁴ Zweig, Brian Economic Impact Study of Business Activities of the Rensselaer Plateau (May 2012) p. 3.

⁵ Information regarding the geology, ecology and wildlife was provided by the Rensselaer Plateau Alliance *Regional Conservation Plan* (2013) and the Rensselaer Plateau Alliance website: www.rensseplaerplateau.org.

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local area. Its forests still exist in relatively large continuous blocks with few dividing roads. The natural resources of the Plateau are valuable for providing clean air, clean water, stormwater handling, and healthy habitat for many native plants and wildlife.

The Plateau's forests provide healthy habitat for many native plants and wildlife. The large unbroken forest is essential to the populations of fisher, bobcat, bear, moose, porcupine, hermit thrush, and black-throated blue warbler. Many birds are experiencing declining population numbers in the Northeast due in part to loss of large blocks of forest.

The Plateau is home to numerous plants that are rare to the regions, and some that are at the global scale. Some examples of rare plant species include: Allegheny vine, Anderson's Peat Moss, Farwell's milfoil, Purple bladderwort and Wood Lily.

The ecological distinctiveness of the Rensselaer Plateau has led it to be included in the New York State's *Open Space Plan (2014)* and recognized as an "*Important Bird Area*" by Audubon New York, and the focus of conservation efforts of the Rensselaer Land Trust and The Nature Conservancy.



Existing Recreation Opportunities

As Map A on page 5 illustrates, the Rensselaer Plateau offers a variety of recreation opportunities including fishing, hiking, birding, snow shoeing, mountain biking and cycling, auto touring, horseback riding, cross-country skiing and snowmobiling. Many trails are open to the public, others are through private easements or recreational facilities. Most of the present trail options for hiking and mountain biking are located at public facilities such as the state forest preserves and wildlife management areas, state parks and Dyken Pond. A new opportunity for trail development is on the 350-acre Rensselaer Plateau Community Forest in Poestenkill which is anticipated to have trails as well other programs. Below is a summary of the present public recreational opportunities:

- Grafton Lakes State Park⁶ includes six ponds and nearly 2500 acres. Long Pond has a large, sandy beach, which is a popular summer attraction. All ponds have fishing access, launch facilities for canoes, sailboats and rowboats, electric boats are allowed. There are also picnicking facilities and 25 miles of trails including nature trails, hiking, biking and equestrian. In winter, the trails are groomed for snowmobilers, and visitors may also snowshoe, cross-country ski, ice skate or ice fish when conditions permit.

⁶ NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation website: <http://www.nysparks.com/parks/53/details.aspx>

- Cherry Plain State Park⁷ has 175 acres and features a sandy beach on Black River Pond, with bathhouse and comfort station nearby. Picnic grounds and a boat launch are adjacent to the beach. The park also has bridle paths and hiking, biking and nature trails that serve for cross country skiing in winter. The park has 10 trailer sites, 10 lakeside tent sites as well as 10 "hike-in" tent sites available for overnight camping.



- Dyken Pond Environmental Education Center is a 594-acre property owned and operated by Rensselaer County. It is an ecological teaching unit as well as a low-use recreation area open to public access. It is also supported by a partnership with The Friends of Dyken Pond. Open during daylight hours, the park features over 6 miles of trails for hiking, bird watching and nature photography, with a launch for non-motorized boats, and areas on the shoreline for fishing.⁸
- The Capital District Wildlife Management Area (WMA) is a 4,153-acre area that provides opportunities for hunting, fishing, trapping, wildlife observation, cross country skiing, hiking, mountain biking and horseback riding. There are seven miles of public truck trails and nine miles of multiple use trails for hiking, skiing, mountain biking and horseback riding.⁹
- Pittstown State Forest is an 1155-acre state forest with approximately 8 miles of mountain biking trails which are maintained by Saratoga Mountain Bike Association which has an official volunteer stewardship agreement with the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation.¹⁰
- Rensselaer Plateau Community Forest is a 350-acre forest in Poestenkill that is owned by the Rensselaer Plateau Alliance and managed with oversight of a committee of community members. It is newly established in 2015 with several miles of existing trails and plans for new trails for hiking, cross country skiing and mountain biking. If conditions and connections to other trail networks exist, snowmobiling and horseback riding may be allowed.

⁷ NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation website:

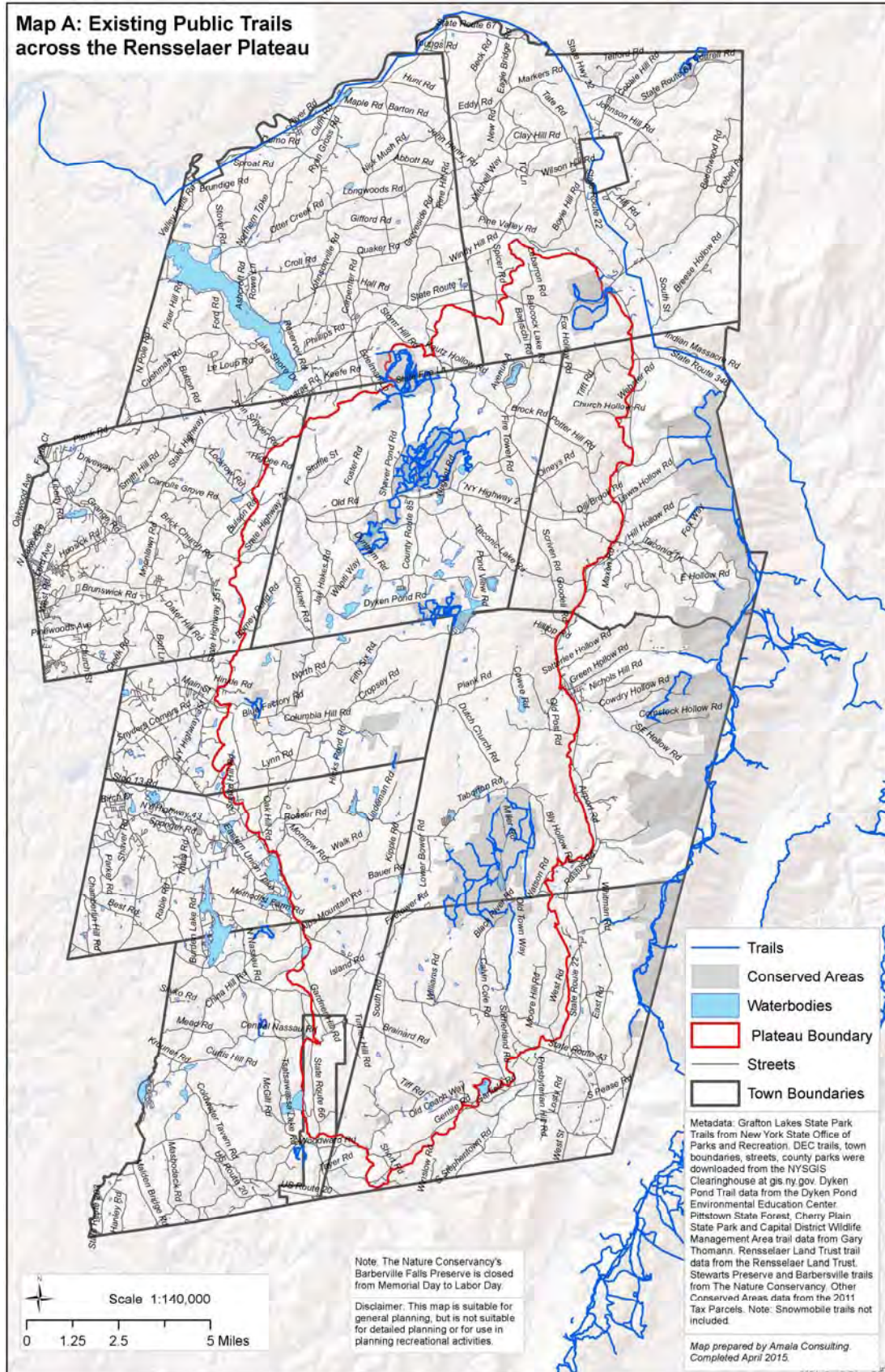
<http://www.nysparks.com/parks/173/details.aspx>

⁸ Dyken Pond Environmental Education Center website: <http://dykenpond.org/>

⁹ NYS Department of Environmental Conservation Website: <http://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/86016.html>

¹⁰ Saratoga Mountain Bike Association Website: <http://saratogamtb.org/pittstown/>

**Map A: Existing Public Trails
across the Rensselaer Plateau**



Public Engagement

This project engaged a variety of stakeholders and the general public to gather information and ideas for an enhanced trail system. The meetings were held in different venues on the Plateau and facilitated by the Rensselaer Plateau Alliance and the Hudson River Valley Greenway. Three stakeholder meetings were held in the Fall of 2014 including a meeting with Rensselaer Plateau Alliance member organizations who represent a wide variety of interests related to the Plateau including land conservation and stewardship groups throughout the Capital District, recreational organizations such as mountain bike associations, equestrian clubs, snow mobile, cycling and hiking clubs, and representatives of local institutions, attractions and businesses. A second stakeholder meeting was held with municipal leaders, planners, and planning boards from the Plateau towns. A third was held with the business owners who have businesses on the Plateau or on key corridors or in town centers adjacent to the Plateau. The initial public engagement was then brought to the greater Plateau community at a public workshop held in Poestenkill in early 2015. There was healthy diversity at each meeting with a broad spectrum of interests, experiences, ideas and concerns.



All of the stakeholder meetings and the public workshop included a breakout session to allow for brainstorming about trail opportunities which then culminated in a report back to the full group. Each participant was given a map to mark-up with existing trails and new trail opportunities. Each group was also asked to discuss possible issues and constraints.

Remarkably, many of the same ideas for specific opportunities, trail segments, constraints and other considerations surfaced at each meeting and within each group and are represented in the goals and strategies identified in this Vision Plan.

A final public presentation was held in June of 2015 to present the trail vision, gain feedback and discuss Phase II of the project.

On the page following is a summary of the most commonly identified opportunities, recommended strategies and concerns. Map B at the end of this section illustrates many of the trail opportunities identified.

Rensselaer Plateau Trail Vision Plan

General Priority Trail Ideas

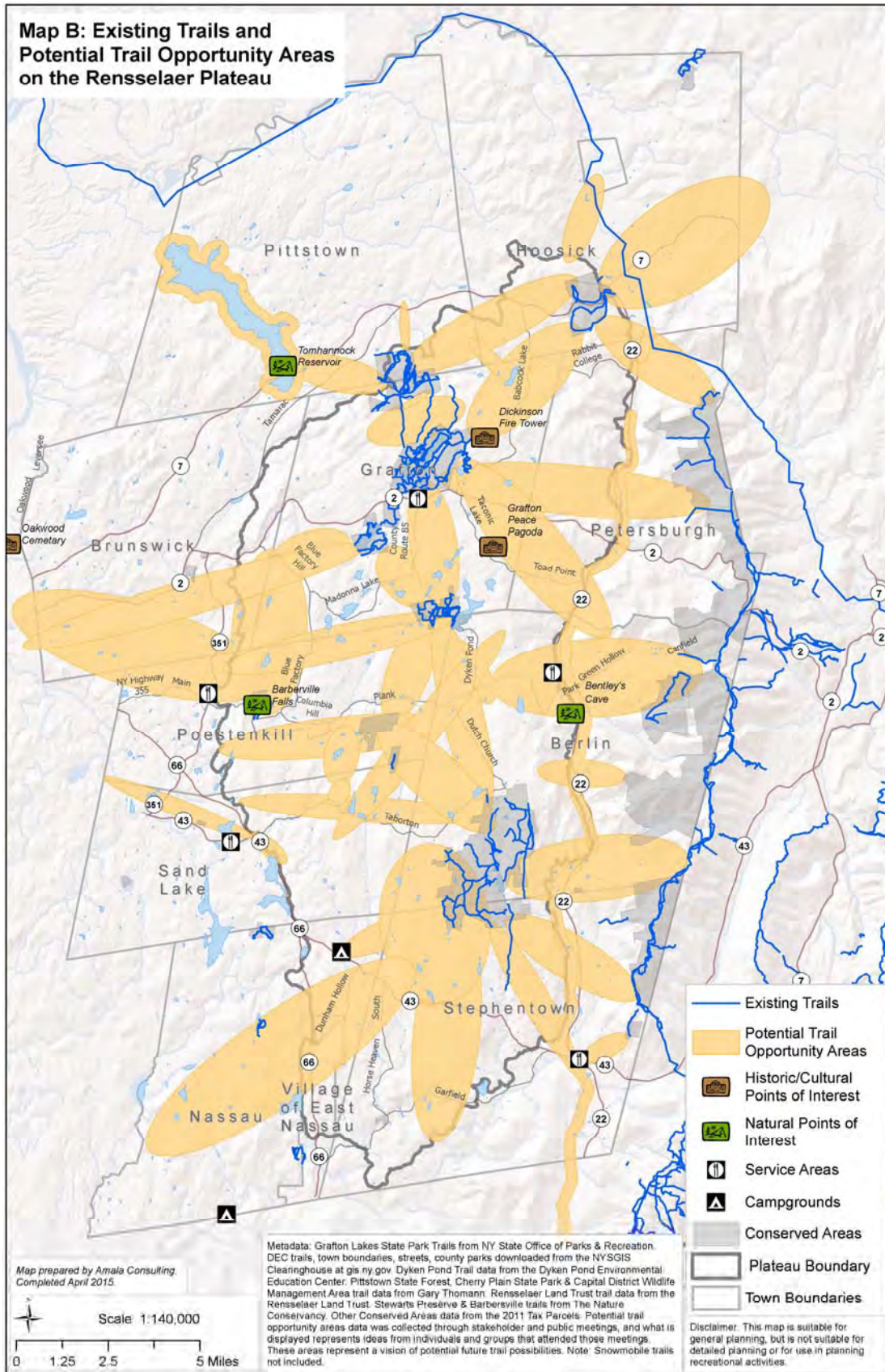
- Connect trails to town economic centers and population centers to increase business and provide goods and services to visitors.
- Connect existing clusters of recreational amenities utilizing loops wherever possible.
- Develop trails, including multi-use trails and single use trails, responsive to a wide variety of users.
- Consider trails that alternate users with seasons (Ex: snowmobiling and equestrian)
- Provide trails for all ages and abilities.
- Utilize existing assets such as scenic views, cultural and historic assets and natural hikes to augment trail experiences.
- Utilization of existing infrastructure easements, rail beds and utility corridors.
- Old logging roads are easily converted to trails.
- Utilization of rural roads, paper streets, gravel roads, stage coach roads.
- Use snowmobile club licensing agreements as a model for other trails.

Specific Trail Opportunities

- Connect Grafton Lakes State Park with Pittstown and Tibbetts State Forests
- Connect Grafton Lakes State Park with Dyken Pond and Cherry Plain State Park
- Connect the Community Forest to Dyken Pond
- Connect the Plateau to the Taconic Crest Trail System - a northern connection through Petersburg and a southern connection in Berlin/Cherry Plain.
- Plan for connections to the planned Corkscrew Rail Trail in Stephentown.
- Utilize the Poestenkill Creek and Wynantskill Creek to create a trail that someday connects to the Hudson River and residents of Troy and Rensselaer.
- Utilization of the Old Albany-Bath Road
- Connect the Plateau to Bear's Head and Sand Lake hamlets

Issues and Constraints

- Trail maintenance (overgrowth, garbage etc.)
- Volunteer fatigue – trail maintenance and development
- User conflicts/incompatible users and the ability to management this issue.
- Maintaining non-permanent easements, licensing agreements – trail segments can disappear when properties change hands
- Visitors/users straying onto private property not part of trails.
- Difficult to incentivize easements
- Liability concerns – real and/or perceived
- Safety – trails span a large geographic area, some areas very remote



Vision, Goals and Potential Strategies

River to Ridge

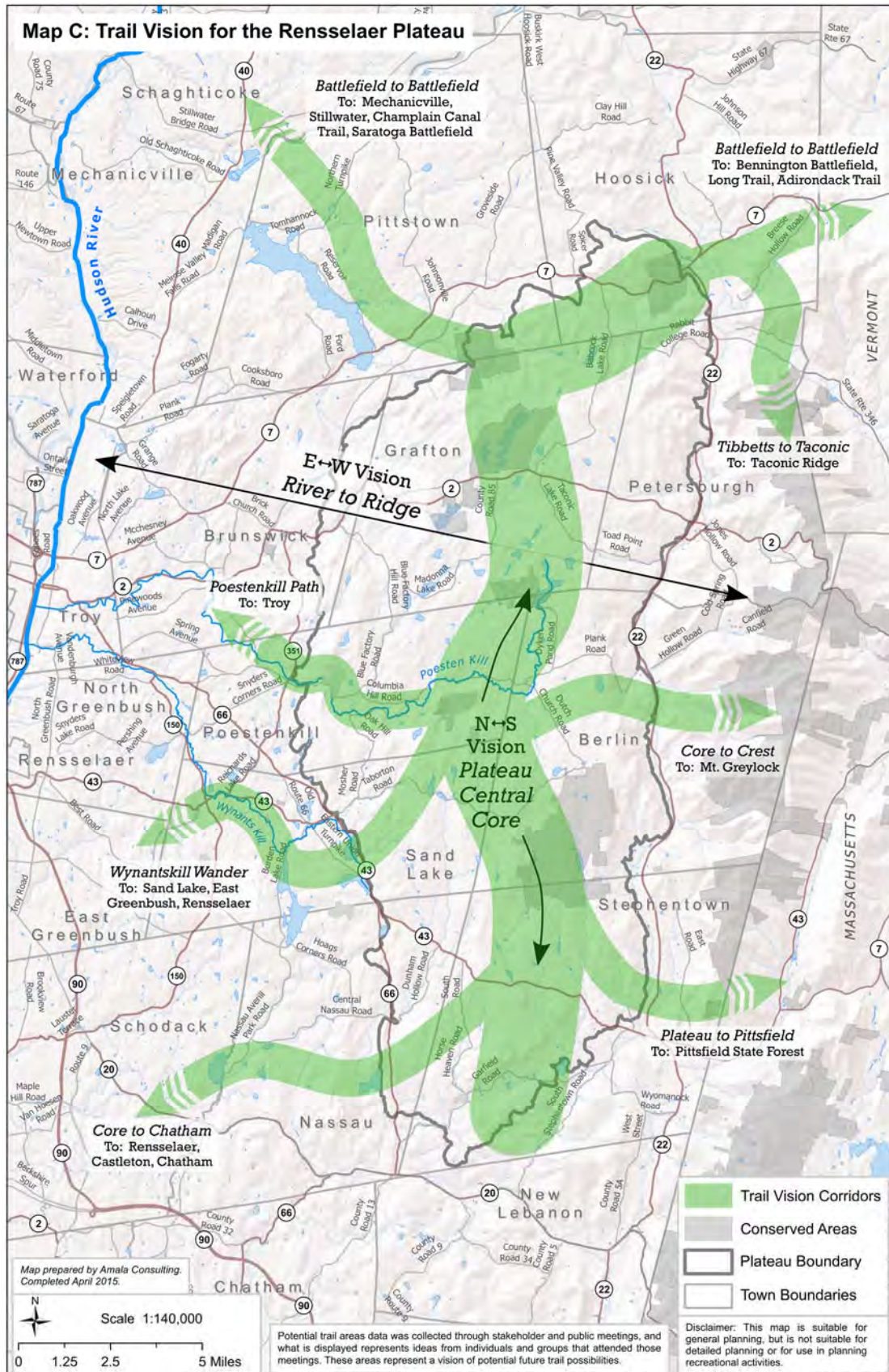
The Rensselaer Plateau will have a diverse trail system that allows its communities and visitors to experience the Plateau in new and diverse ways. The trail system will provide a wide range of year round recreational opportunities, for all ages and abilities connecting people to its unique natural, scenic, historic and community resources in an environmentally responsible manner. It will benefit the region's local economy by attracting visitors and new residents. This trail system will unite the historic river towns of the Hudson River with the communities on the Plateau and will link across the valley of the Hoosic Rivers to the Taconic Ridge.

Goal 1: Provide opportunities for a wide variety of uses year round, for all ages and abilities - from snowmobiles and auto touring routes to cross-country ski trails, bike paths and equestrian facilities.

The Plateau trail system will have a wide variety of on and off-road trails covering a wide range of recreational activities including walking, hiking, mountain biking, equestrian, cycling, paddling, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing and auto touring. Trails will be available for all ages and abilities including trails that are handicap accessible, ideal for learning or light activity, appeal to hard-core adventurers and everything in between.

Potential Strategies and Resources

- Create hiking trails for all ability levels including short hikes to destination points and day long back country treks that may include overnight campsite opportunities.
- Identify a location for a formalized mountain biking trail network.
- Work with local cycling groups to identify and map quality cycling routes on the Plateau that consider safety, general road conditions (including available shoulder, traffic), difficulty (elevation changes) and scenic attributes.
- Identify opportunities for multi-use trails including seasonal user changes such as snow mobile and equestrian.
- Work with local equestrian organizations to identify opportunities for expanding existing networks.
- Identify shorter segment nature hikes along longer trails to engage walkers and hikers in the local ecology and environment.



Goal 2: Collaborate with property owners, communities and other partners to ensure proper stewardship related to maintenance, public access, safety and sustainability.

As so much of the Plateau is privately owned property, partnerships with property owners for trail easements will be critical to the success of this vision and respect for property will be essential. Maintenance and management of trails can be a daunting task if not properly planned and analyzed for not just feasibility but sustainability. Collaboration with local communities on projects and building off of existing recreational and environmental resource operators are obvious opportunities for creating efficiencies and economies of scale. Priority should be given to developing trails that are most feasible in terms of land ownership and cost; are appropriate for different user groups; create important connections to other trails, assets and destinations on and off the Plateau; and connect to town centers.



Potential Strategies and Resources

- Establish criteria for prioritizing trail development.
- Create a trail easement program for private property owners that might include renewable easements or opting out mechanisms.
- Set up a mechanism to indemnify property owners who make their land available to the public.
- Establish a trail maintenance program that collaborates with different recreational organizations and establish a group of volunteers for different geographic parts of the Plateau to avoid volunteer fatigue.
- Develop low-profile, attractive trailhead/recreational signage in key locations including along transportation corridors, and in town centers.
- Work with the region's police, emergency medical services and fire departments as recreational assets become more established to ensure that they are aware of all trail locations and to provide emergency contact information for trail users.

Goal 3: Provide a central core of access and linkages to recreational, cultural and environmental destination points located in the Plateau.

The “central core” of the Rensselaer Plateau trail system (see Map C) focuses on connecting up the many attractions that the Plateau offers including existing trails, the Community Forest, Grafton Lakes State Park, Cherry Plain State Park, Tibbet’s State Forest, Pittstown State Forest, Dyken Pond Environmental Education Center, Bentley’s Cave, fishing areas, historic resources, and scenic vistas.

Potential Strategies and Resources

- Create loops that connect clustered destinations such as connecting Grafton Lakes State Park with Pittstown and Tibbets State Forests.
- Connect Grafton Lakes State Park with Dyken Pond and Cherry Plain State Park.
- Connect the Community Forest with Dyken Pond.
- Work with municipalities to identify and build local trails and related recreational projects’
- Integrate nature walks hikes, birding etc. as shorter segments along longer hike loops.
- Identify key scenic vistas, cultural assets that trails could connect to.



Goal 4: Create trails that connect to trail systems off the Plateau broadening and strengthening the Region’s overall recreational amenities.

The Plateau has many opportunities to connect to existing and proposed trail systems off the Plateau. Some are practically adjacent, others are farther away but not out of reach depending on the type of trail.

Potential Strategies and Resources (see map)

- *Battlefield to Battlefield* – Connects the northern Plateau trails to the Bennington Battlefield to the Northeast and Saratoga Battlefield to the northwest.
- *Poestenkill Path* – Connects the Plateau to the Hudson River in Troy by following the Poestenkill Creek.

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- *Wynantskill Wanderer* – Connects the Plateau to Town of Sand Lake and on to the City of Rensselaer and the Hudson River.
- *Core to Crest* – Connects that Plateau to the existing Taconic Crest Trail System in the south from Cherry Plain State Park, through Berlin over Maddison Hollow
- *Plateau to Pittsfield* – Connects the Plateau to the trail system at Pittsfield State Forest
- *Core to Chatham* – Connects the Plateau to the Nassau trail, and the future Harlem Rail Trail which is proposed to reach Chatham.

Goal 5: Focus on existing resources and infrastructure to establish trails and linkages including rural roads, utility corridors, and rail beds.

Rural roads are an easy option to be utilized as a trail segment yet are often overlooked in search of off-road opportunities. Paper streets and stagecoach roads still in the public domain are other “low-hanging fruit” opportunities. Utility easements and rail beds are commonly utilized but require licenses or other forms of agreements with land owners who may be the utility or railroad company but they too may have easements. “Rail trails” have become a widely celebrated use of operating and abandoned rail beds – some of which are in the early stages of development

just off the Plateau -- including the Corkscrew Trail in Stephentown. Snowmobile clubs often have licenses from utility companies for use of their lands. A similar agreement could be made for non-winter months for other recreational user groups.



Potential Strategies and Resources

- Identify rural roads that are most suitable as “trails” particularly where they could be utilized to make short term connections to existing trails or where off-road linkages are do not appear feasible.
- Consider opportunities for using utility easements. Identify all utility properties and easements including electric, gas and sewer.
- Work with loggers and property owners to identify old logging roads as opportunities.

- Map all paper streets, gravel roads and old stage coach roads as information is available.

Goal 6: Strengthen local economies by strategically designing a system that connects town centers with trails and work with local businesses and community leaders to identify amenities, goods and services marketable to trail users.

The *Economic Impact Study of Business Activities of the Rensselaer Plateau* determined that tourism and recreation, food services and drinking places all play an important role on the Plateau both in terms of dollars and jobs supported. While some businesses and communities are capitalizing better than others on this opportunity – everyone could do better. There is considerable opportunity to expand these industries with additional recreational amenities – particularly when such amenities are located near town centers, and businesses are located along key transportation corridors such as NYS Routes 2 and 22. Local businesses can be partners in enhancing the recreational experience by providing goods and services most likely to be desired by visitors to the Plateau.

Potential Strategies and Resources

- Create trails that connect to town centers of economic activity.
- Focus on creating a diverse array of trails that bring visitors to the Plateau year round to provide additional income to local businesses.
- Create a “tool kit” for local businesses that provides them with information about local trails, the types of visitors that are likely going to use the trails, and the goods and services they are most likely to purchase.
- Work with communities to provide visitor amenities such as information kiosks, information on town websites, restroom options, parking and wayfinding and trailhead signage.



Conclusion

Making Connections—Creating Experiences

Social scientists and economists are increasingly recognizing that investing in experiences yields a greater long-term personal benefit than say purchasing a desirable (but not necessary) consumer good. In terms of choosing among the options of outdoor recreation activities, the prospect of planning and heading out onto a trail opens one's imagination to a wide range of enjoyable trail-based activities—all seasons, many modes of travel, a myriad of settings. Each phase of this trail-based recreation experience creates long-lasting memories and value for the individuals involved—the planning and anticipation phase, the experience out on the trail itself, and the reflection phase—which can be enjoyed many years later.

The Rensselaer Plateau offers a unique setting for a wide range of trail experiences connecting travelers to nature, history and the slower pace of life in the small towns and rural landscapes of the region. Whether on a scenic ride on the highways and town roads across the flanks of the plateau where one can enjoy vistas of working farms, forests and peaceful hamlet centers or rolling with a group of mountain bike riders along a small stream on an abandoned gravel road deep in the center of the plateau's forest, or gliding along the soft winter snow on a pair of cross-country skis —there are countless trail experiences to be enjoyed travelling around the plateau.

In rating a recreation experience, people typically base that evaluation upon their expectation—and how well it was met. Organizing the effort toward making these collective trail experiences better is a key objective of this vision plan. And so, some of the most cost-effective, early investments in the enhancement of the trail system which will be identified in the more detailed phase II of the plan will focus on assembling and sharing the best information about the resources that exist and can be immediately accessed. For example, identifying a scenic on-the-road bike and driving route that can create some of the initial corridors of the "River to Ridge" trail including mapping, signage and promotion of this trail route. Over time, such routes can be supplemented with improved connections, such as off-the-road shared-use paths where one can be free to roam far from our automobiles.

The extent to which these trail experiences can be made accessible and enjoyable to a wide variety of users will increasingly make the Rensselaer Plateau a trail-lovers destination. Benefits of that outcome for residents and property owners include increased local business activity and improved property values and quality of life as the enhanced trail system provides an important economic amenity value. In the city, being able to step outside one's door and walk to a nice restaurant or attractive park creates an important part of the value of one's home and property. On the Plateau, the ability to step outside one's door and go anywhere on a trail is a refreshing thought—whether by bike, ski or snowshoe, horseback or snowmobile or just taking a hike. Time to hit the trail.

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