

The Caroga Process

Five Decades of Citizen-Led Comprehensive Community Planning

Why do comprehensive planning in New York State?

Based on *Town Law § 263, New York's Guide to Zoning and the Comprehensive Plan* provides:

"The comprehensive plan is the culmination of a planning process that establishes the official land use policy of a community and presents goals and a vision for the future that guides official decision-making. The comprehensive plan invariably includes a thorough analysis of current data showing land development trends and issues, community resources, and public needs for transportation, recreation, and housing. . . Having a comprehensive or well-considered plan ensures that forethought and planning preceded zoning and zoning amendments." (see <https://www.townofcaroga.com/notes/zoning-and-the-comprehensive-plan.pdf>)

In other words, the community process can advance opportunities and reduce risks with land use. By aligning a clear long-term vision with workable goals, a collaborative and data-driven process can bring people together to create momentum, inspire investments, and get things done. Ultimately, impacts should serve town people's best interests, so designing an optimum plan depends on robust participation in an open, responsible, and flexible process for prioritizing goals.

To secure a healthy, safe, and affordable quality of life for all residents, specified local priorities commonly build on the town's profile of existing resources and conditions to address people's needs, in areas such as public infrastructure, transportation systems, outdoor recreation, residential housing, business commerce, and land use. The resulting policy document is meant to guide wise and sound decision making for local zoning laws and future community revitalization.

Why do comprehensive planning in the Town of Caroga? What opportunities and risks exist?

In 1980, Fulton County Planner Bernard Schmelz keenly described the kickoff history for planning in Caroga (see https://townofcaroga.com/comprehensive_plan/nypf1980_caroga_process.pdf).

Caroga's shimmering lakes and creeks—surrounded by scenic buildings and vast Forest Preserve—stand out as natural strengths. Additionally, the Town's attractive location on the frontier of the Northern Mohawk Valley and Southern Adirondack Mountains adds value to its highly accessible recreational assets. Opportunities abound in Caroga. Yet, a near catastrophe sparked planning.

Caroga's planning process began in 1968 when the Health Department quarantined East and West Caroga Lakes after finding high counts of coliform bacteria. Several factors set off that 1968 crisis. Drought reduced natural rainwater flow. Failing shoreline septic systems discharged residents' wastewater into the lakes. The State Campground poured visitors' effluent into East Caroga Lake. Plus, at that time, the year-round population of about 800 residents swelled 10-fold seasonally to over 8,000 summer residents and about 2,500 daily visitors, so overuse escalated problems. No abstraction here. Local context and circumstances made vivid both problems and solutions. It was time to act, based on wise and sound decision making. That water crisis was the catalyst to plan. Equity needed to be considered comprehensively along with environmental and economic factors.

In September 1968, the Caroga Town Board appointed a Planning Board, adopted a sanitary code, and provided enforcement to resolve the acute crisis. To work optimally for everyone, the strategy required maintenance over time and enhancements through investments. Since then, Caroga has had three citizen-led planning processes. Each one addressed wastewater management and a host of other community issues, goals, and objectives. The first Caroga Process delivered a plan in 1978, the second in 2002, and the third in 2011 (see https://townofcaroga.com/comprehensive_plan/). The fourth 2024-2025 Caroga Process aims to build on prior Plans and engage the public—to address community needs, protect town assets, mitigate local risks, and develop emerging opportunities—by drawing on best-practice principles and aligning local-regional priorities to advance a targeted investments in Caroga.

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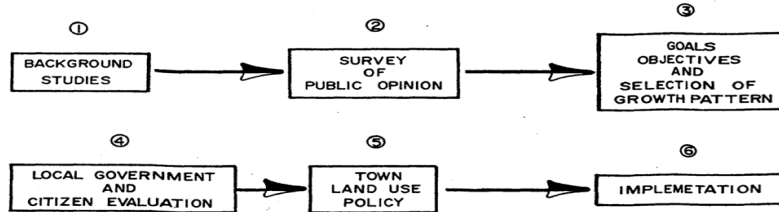
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Plan 1: Town of Caroga Land Use Plan (June 28, 1978)

For technical reports, see https://townofcaroga.com/comprehensive_plan/

For the 1978 Plan, see https://townofcaroga.com/comprehensive_plan/caroga_land_use_plan_1978.pdf

Planning Board: Robert Kane (Chair), George Curtin, Richard Lorence, Gordon Croucher, Fritz Ann Dillon, Harry MacIntosh, Jesse Lake Jr.



Grounded in a purposeful 6-step process (see figure, p.3), the 1978 *Town of Caroga Land Use Plan* followed the region’s historic 1971 *Adirondack Park Agency Act (APA)* and 1973 *Adirondack Land Use and Development Plan*. Caroga’s local New York State Assemblyman and Republican Whip Glenn Harris led deals to advance the regional approach to long-range land use planning within the Adirondack Park. As described by Brad Edmondson in his 2021 book *A Wild Idea*, Harris specifically ensured that details could be modified and tailored locally to meet the needs of municipalities and residents.

Enter the Fulton County Planning staff in partnership with the Caroga Town Board—led by Supervisor Emma Krause—and the Planning Board—led by Chairman Bob Kane. In 1974, local and regional partners secured New York State grant funding for a comprehensive planning process. That process began with deep-dive background studies to assess local conditions and write data-driven reports. Next, with robust resident engagement, a public opinion survey tallied about 1600 survey forms. About a third were from local residents, a third from seasonal residents, and 99% from taxpaying land owners. Studies and surveys informed proposed priorities, recommended goals, and specified objectives for Caroga’s future. Further, government officials and local citizens publicly evaluated the draft proposal before the Town Board adopted and implemented the *Land Use Plan*.

The 1978 *Land Use Plan* provided on page 5,

“As a general pattern for development, it is recommended that the character of development and intensity of land use should reflect a ‘recreational community’ growth pattern. This will not only enhance the existing small town life style and recreational potential which the Town Board and the Planning Board believe should be maintained and protected, but will also identify potential areas for recreational development that can be planned within the scope of available municipal services.”

In addition, the 1978 *Plan* provided on page 5,

“The public and private sectors should make every effort to coordinate their decisions in order to preserve and protect the existing character of the Town of Caroga while acknowledging the fact that growth will occur. The quality of life which is associated with the small town and rural life style should be reinforced. To achieve the desired quality of life, the existing historical, aesthetic, ecological and open space aspects of the Town of Caroga should be enhanced, improved and protected.”

The 1978 *Plan* included guiding goals and specified objectives for 5 priorities: (1) *Transportation*, (2) *Economy*, (3) *Population & Housing*, (4) *Private Land Use*, and (5) *Public Land Use*. Land parcels were classified into 5 categories: (1) *Resort*, (2) *Developed Lakeshore*, (3) *Rural Residential*, (4) *Conservation*, or (5) *Public Facilities*. The classifications directly informed the original 1979 *Caroga Zoning Ordinance* (see https://townofcaroga.com/ordinances/caroga_zoning_ordinance_1979.pdf). Further, in 1980, Caroga was the fifth Adirondack Park Town to enact an Agency-Approved Local Land Use Plan (ALLUP), thereby transferring administration and enforcement of certain Adirondack Park Agency authority over land use and development to local government officials in the Town of Caroga.

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Plan 2: Town of Caroga Comprehensive Plan (July 2002)

https://townofcaroga.com/comprehensive_plan/caroga_comprehensive_plan_2002.pdf

2002 Comprehensive Plan Committee: George Lake (Chair), George Abdella, Carol Barker, John Blackmon, William Fielding, Doreen Ford, Ed Jutras, Donna Goldman, Gay Lefebvre, Frank Malagisi, Inger McDaniel, Jim McLelland, Barbara McMartin, Elizabeth Mowrey, Alec Reid, Douglas Smith, Robert Sullivan, Eric White

Like the 1978 *Land Use Plan*, the 2002 *Comprehensive Plan* had robust public participation and regional collaboration, as noted in the *Letter to the people of the Town from the Comprehensive Planning Committee*. By considering input and examples, the Committee envisioned a guiding mission, described local assets, formulated a Town profile, prioritized core goals, and noted land uses.

The 2002 *Comprehensive Plan Mission Statement* provided on page 1,

“A collective vision of our community [is] a tool for building on our current assets. This plan will guide us into the future as we seek to preserve and restore our environment while improving the health, safety, and quality of life of residents and the economy and image of the Town of Caroga. The plan is intended to encourage growth in the town that is consistent with the town’s natural resources and character.”

On page 1, the 2002 *Plan* described existing assets as follows:

“The Town of Caroga is known for the beauty of its...lakes and numerous small streams and ponds bordered by forested slopes. A large portion of the land in the town is Forest Preserve, which provides a protected setting for the lakeshores, the town center, and the small settlements, which are clustered along its roadsides...The town is a gateway to the southern Adirondacks...The people of Caroga are part of its economic base...The town has a rich heritage in the Adirondack Park...[as] a tannery town...The...tannery’s open fields...were turned into a lovely golf course. About the same time the Shermans built an amusement park, complete with a merry-go-round [and]...great dance bands that attracted people from all over. In recent years work has begun to restore the park to its former glory.”

The 2002 Town Profile included sections about Population, History, Associations & Clubs, Structural & Physical Changes, and Town Government (including Town Board, Planning Board, and Zoning Board of Appeals). A Business Inventory provided a 1978 List and 2002 List. Noted Town landmarks included Sherman’s Amusement Park with its Carousel and the Nick Stoner Golf Course and Statue. The overall character of the town continued to be celebrated as a rural recreational community.

The 2002 *Comprehensive Plan’s* prioritized guiding goals elaborated on pages 2 to 12 were to:

“(1) Maintain and protect the natural resources of the town...and water management; (2) Encourage vibrant community life [and]... recreational amenities; (3) Maintain, protect, and promote the town’s historical heritage; (4) Improve the administration, implementation, and enforcement of land use and water regulations [and]... revisit the town’s zoning codes, building codes, and septic codes; (5) Maintain and/or develop high quality services, especially effective law enforcement for both lakes and highways, fire protection, emergency rescue, public works such as roads and winter care of the roads, phones, electric service, cable TV, and so on; (6) Encourage public and private partnerships to provide the above goals [given]... a limited economic base [and]... limited amenities...other than its wonderful natural setting; (7) Promote the...vision for the town to its residents and potential tourists through improved communication and...activities; (8) Develop a means of encouraging or promoting continued and expanded community involvement and input into the management of and planning for the town; and (9) In all the above goals, the town should be aware of the need to enhance the health, safety, and quality of life of all residents, both year-round and seasonal, and visitors.”

The 2002 Plan listed specified zoning districts and some regulations with additional mixed land uses: (1) Resort & Town Hamlet; (2) Lakefront Residential LF-1, LFA, LFB, LF2.5; (3) Residential R-1.5, R-3, R-8.5, R-10, R-15 & Highway Commercial/Residential HC, HC-1, HC-2.5; (4) Conservation; (5) Open Development Area ODA. Zoning revisions followed (see https://townofcaroga.com/ordinances/caroga_zoning_ordinance_2006.pdf).

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Plan 3: Town of Caroga Comprehensive Plan (October 2011)

https://townofcaroga.com/comprehensive_plan/town%20of%20caroga%20adopted%20comprehensive%20plan.pdf

2011 Planning Board: Scott Horton (Chair), Steve Putman, Michael Voght, Sharla Wager, Robert Miller, Greta Frasier, Mary Johnson, John Fenzel (2010), Tor Shekerjian (2011)

The 2011 *Comprehensive Plan* began by introducing a bold new *Vision Statement*:

“Where We Want to Be in 2025: ...Caroga will continue to be a small, rural town...[with] Town Center...located near...the former Sherman’s Amusement Park. The Town Center will be a walkable, integrated open-air, multiuse development where residents and visitors will be able to gather, socialize, eat, live, drink, recreate, shop, visit, exercise and enjoy its attractive streetscapes and landscapes. It will be anchored by retail, dining, and leisure uses, as well as by recreational and residential uses and be the most diverse area of the Town. The Town will be recognized for its natural beauty, rich history and heritage and year round outdoor recreational opportunities which will have restored the Town of Caroga’s attractiveness as a place to live and raise a family. The variety of housing types available, including housing in Town Center will be an attraction. The Town’s strong and aggressive water quality program will have created excellent water quality in all of the Town’s lakes. The Town’s tax base will have stabilized by the development in Town Center, new housing developments and the increase in sales tax revenues coming from a strong tourism-based economy....Achieving this Plan’s vision will require...elected officials, agencies offices, volunteers and the public working together toward the common goal of making Caroga a great place to live and do business.”

The 2011 *Plan* also introduced *The Vision...Town Center Map*. While the basic Town Center concept has endured, the detailed aspirational features have not. For instance, the 2011 *Land Use Map* and *Town Center Area Map* illustrated proposed developments, and the *Plan’s* prioritized projects included:

- new private “Hotel” on Mead Creek with a nearby “Public Use” Parking Lot and new “Boat Launch”;
- new “Town Hall, Visitor Center, and Public Restrooms” sited on private land next to the Post Office;
- new “Dumping Station” and 60-site “RV Park” with parking and new athletic fields near the Post Office;
- new Sherman’s Park “Mixed Use” and “Shops”, with a new “Restaurant” inside the Carousel House.

Public hearings questioned feasibility and financing. The new RV Park and its dumping station were controversial. People also opposed the cultural loss of Sherman’s Park and its iconic shoreline carousel.

Additional 2011 *Plan* chapters included: *Summary, Town Profile, History, Town Government, Economy, Recreational/Natural Resources, Housing, Public Input, Land Use Plan, and Review*. To update technical reports from former *Plans*, the 2011 *Plan* also elaborated detailed demographics (pp. 11-30):

- Essentially, Caroga’s demographic trends showed an aging population, with fewer children since 1990 and an increasing median age. Fulton County and New York State had similar population and aging trends.
- Caroga’s income trends showed increasing median household income (MHI) that appeared comparable and tied to county trends, with a 2000 MHI of \$34,911.00 in Caroga and \$33,663 MHI in Fulton County.
- At Wheelerville School, K-8 student enrollment peaked in 1990 with a decline in the 1990s, followed by relatively flat or fluctuating enrollments. Since 1990, the lowest reported recent enrollment was in 2009.
- Notably, Caroga’s housing included both seasonal and year-round units. Caroga had more seasonal units than any other town in Fulton County, but Caroga’s seasonal housing numbers have been flat over time. Caroga’s year-round and owner-occupied housing increased from 1970 to 2000 and then leveled off. Caroga had fewer year-round occupied units than other county towns, except Bleeker and Stratford.
- On page 29, Caroga’s 2010 land uses included about 3000 total parcels, with 54% in residential or seasonal residential uses. Additionally, 21,729 acres (3% of parcels, 63% of acreage) were listed as “State Land” (i.e., constitutionally-protected “forever wild” Forest Preserve lands). At the same time, more than 1000 parcels (34%) were reported to be private vacant land, with 5,854 acres of undeveloped open space.

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Essentially, the 2011 *Plan* prioritized renewing Caroga's Town Center area as a "catalyst" for town-wide revitalization. In fact, the *Plan* advanced an ongoing process of Caroga Hamlet Smart Growth planning (see https://www.townofcaroga.com/comprehensive_plan/3-caroga-lake-h3p2-book.pdf).

Importantly, the *Plan* flagged wastewater management as a key redevelopment barrier (see p. 6):

"Caroga has no public water supply or sewer services...Potable water utilized in the Town is supplied from groundwater wells [or lakes]. All wastewater is disposed of into private septic systems [or holding tanks]."

So, as noted on page 6, Caroga's revitalization depends on:

"Town Center...construction of a...municipal sewer collection and treatment system. The proposed system would serve a targeted area [in]...a Town Sewer District."

A proposal was detailed on pages 47 to 50, with two options considered for wastewater treatment:

- *Option A* was a wastewater treatment plant within Caroga (2001 estimate: \$4,384,000—\$6,406,000).
- *Option B* was a force main to the Gloversville-Johnstown wastewater facility (2001 estimate: \$5,888,000).

Each option also had additional annual estimated costs for operation and maintenance. In 2001, the total estimated cost was about \$10,000,000. Without funding, the project was not implemented.

Additional recommendations of the 2011 *Comprehensive Plan* included:

- watershed plans & lake testing (p.8, 65; 1. E/W Caroga, 2. Canada/Green/West, 3. Pine, 4. E/W Stoner);
- town-wide recreation advisory committee (p.9, 66; e.g., identify needs, opportunities, policies, etc.);
- natural-recreational attraction marketing (p. 9, 43; e.g., brochures, museum exhibits, workshops, tours)
- recreation centers (p.7; e.g., 1. Town Center-Sherman's/W. Caroga Lake, 2. Campground/E. Caroga Lake, 3. Royal Mountain/S. Caroga, 4. Golf Course-Trails/Wheelerville, 5. Fishing Access-FireTower-Marina/Canada-Green-West Lakes, 6. Beach Pavilion/Pine Lake, 7. Forest Preserve Nature Trails/Stoner Lakes);
- road improvements (p.5,6; Hwy 29A/10 streetscape; redirect West Caroga South Shore Rd. to Bath Ave.);
- communication improvements (p.50; e.g., cell/broadband systems, law enforcement, safety protection);
- housing diversification (p.10; e.g., beyond single-family houses, with apartments, condos, townhouses);
- municipal building reconstruction (p.40; e.g., new Town Hall to abate hazards from mold, asbestos, etc.);
- zoning amendments (p.7,50, e.g., building design standards, strong enforcement of existing codes).

The 2011 *Plan* only briefly mentioned public management of aquatic invasive species and black flies, and it did not incorporate the Town's existing age-friendly recreation programs for youth and seniors. In addition, it did not anticipate emerging risks with the golf clubhouse / highway garage nor emerging assets of stewardship programs, mountain bike trails, multi-use trails, Caroga Arts, Paradise Ranch, etc. The *Plan* also did not address housing challenges and opportunities with short-term residential rentals, nor did it include innovative strategies such as clean energy, climate smart, or smart growth principles.

After the 2011 *Comprehensive Plan*, the next revised *Zoning Ordinance* and *Land Use Map* were adopted effective January 1, 2019 after detailed consultation in 2018 with the Caroga Town Board, Fulton County Planning Director, and Adirondack Park Agency. Although the Planning Board proposed revisions in 2024, the 2019 *Zoning Ordinance* and 2018 *Land Use Map* both remain in effect in 2024.

For a web version of the 2019 Ordinance, see <https://townofcaroga.com/ordinances/zoning.htm>.

For PDF, <https://townofcaroga.com/ordinances/carogacode-%20adopted%20by%20town%20board%201-1-19.pdf>.

For the 2018 adopted Land Use Map, see https://townofcaroga.com/ordinances/zoning_map.pdf.

For the 2024 proposal, see <https://townofcaroga.com/ordinances/caroga-code-2024-proposed-changes.pdf>.