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## CHAPTER 6 ENVIRONMENT & NATURAL RESOURCES ELEMENT

### I. Introduction and Background Information

#### A. 2025 Update: Environment and Natural Resources Element

The Environment and Natural Resources Element focuses on the natural features that define Ulysses. These natural features contribute to the quality of life and scenic beauty that is cherished by the community. The abundance of open fields, woodlands, wetlands, waterfalls, agricultural fields gorges, and lakeshore are important natural resources that provide habitats for plants and wildlife. This element is based on several guiding laws, policies, planning efforts, surveys, public workshops, and community guidance including the following:

- **Tompkins County Countywide Planning Policies.**
- **2007 Route 96 Corridor Management Study.**
- **2001 Cayuga Lake Scenic Byway Corridor Management Plan.**
- **2018 Town of Ulysses Natural Resources Inventory.**
- **2004 Cayuga Lake Local Waterfront Revitalization Program: Cayuga Lake Waterfront Plan.**
- Public outreach and visioning comments received as part of the public participation process for the plan update.

This element is not meant to be free-standing; it relates to a number of other elements in a complementary manner. In particular, the elements concerning climate change and resiliency, transportation, land use, housing and community well-being all involve and/or influence the environment and natural resources within Ulysses. Accordingly, policies regarding environment and natural resource issues need to be examined in the implementation of other parts of the comprehensive plan, and vice versa.

The policies contained in this element concern broad choices the Town might make about where and how to protect natural resources and mitigate adverse impacts to them. Many of these approaches involve collaboration with local, regional, State, and even Federal entities.

### B. Overview of Environment and Natural Resources Policies from the 2009 Comprehensive Plan

The Environment and Natural Resources policy area from the previous comprehensive plan that was adopted in 2009. This policy area focusing on preserving and protecting natural and environmental resources, protecting existing water resources and maintain water quality, and protecting existing air resources and maintain the air quality for the health and safety of Town residents.

## **II. Laws and Guidelines Influencing Ulysses' Environment & Natural Resources Element**

### **Tompkins Countywide Planning Policies**

The Tompkins County Comprehensive Plan also focuses on protecting the environment and natural resources. Primary planning principles discussed in their plan include ensuring natural features and working rural landscapes are preserved and enhanced and that water resources are clean safe and protected. Various recommendations are offered including promoting best management practices that protect natural resources and productive working lands, improving public access to outdoor recreational resources and opportunities, protecting the ecological, economic, and recreational functions of Cayuga Lake, and protecting streams and their watersheds to maintain water quality, manage stormwater and flooding, and enhance ecological diversity.

### **Ulysses Visioning Efforts**

During the visioning phase of the comprehensive planning process, various exercises were conducted to facilitate feedback from the public about the environment and natural resources. This was completed through a community survey, steering committee meetings, a focus group meeting, and a public open house. The steering committee, focus group, and open house featured strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (also known as a SWOT analysis) to allow for the public to convey their thoughts. The following topics were brought up as priorities that the comprehensive plan update should focus on:

- Continuing conservation efforts of natural resources, open space, and agricultural land
- Protecting natural resources, especially from natural hazards and climate change
- Protecting water resources, especially Cayuga Lake from Harmful Algae Blooms (HABs)
- Connecting the public with the natural environment
- Keeping Taughannock State Park and Black Diamond Trail accessible to all

## **III. Inventory and Analysis of Existing and Projected Environment and Natural Resources Needs**

### **A. Inventory of Existing Natural Resources**

Ulysses features a variety of significant natural resources including water resources, soils, and habitats. These natural resources are cherished by the community and contribute to the scenic beauty that Ulysses provides. These resources should be considered and protected when deciding on future development and conservation efforts in the future.

#### **Waterbodies and Watersheds**

With approximately 7.25 miles of shoreline in Ulysses, Cayuga Lake is one of the most prominent natural features within the Town of Ulysses. Creeks that have a NYSDEC classification include Taughannock Creek, Taughannock Falls, Willow Creek, and Glenwood Creek. There are several

other tributary creeks leading into Cayuga Lake. Additional tributaries include Jenny Creek, Reynaldsville Creek, Bolter Creek, Cold Springs Branch, Boardman Creek, and Trumansburg Creek. These waterbodies are used mainly for drinking water, recreation, tourism, and agricultural purposes.

The Town of Ulysses is fully located within the Cayuga Lake watershed and is part of three sub-watersheds: the West Cayuga Lakeshore North Watershed, Taughannock Creek Watershed, and the West Cayuga Lakeshore South Watershed. In 2017, a Restoration and Protection Plan was prepared for the Cayuga Lake Watershed, updating the 2001 Restoration and Protection Plan. Since the 2001 Plan was issued, new threats to water quality and quantity and the overall health of the watershed have arisen, including invasive species such as *Hydrilla verticillate* (water thyme), large-scale energy development, drought, and HABs.

The Town is part of the Cayuga Lake Watershed Intermunicipal Organization and has been working to mitigate the effects and cause of HABs, as well as working with the Soil and Water Conservation District to map eroding ditches.

### **Wetlands**

The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) regulates all freshwater wetlands greater than 12.4 acres in size, whereas the Army Corps of Engineers protects all “waters of the United States,” including wetlands with a “continuous surface connection” to “traditional interstate navigable waters” through the Clean Water Act. The DEC also protects wetlands smaller than 12.4 acres in size when they are considered to have unusual local importance. New regulations, effective January 1, 2025, provide 11 newly established statutory criteria to better define wetlands of unusual importance. These regulations also expand the wetland buffer, or “adjacent area” under DEC’s jurisdiction from 100 feet to 300 feet. There are several state and federally regulated wetlands in the Town, but due to these new regulations, there may be new state regulated wetlands in the Town. The Town may develop different buffer width requirements as long as they are at least the same as the State's but could be greater.

Prior to changes to the NYSDEC wetland regulations, there were two large state regulated wetlands in the Town. State regulated wetland ME-1 is located on the northeast corner of the intersection of Waterburg and Perry City Roads, southwest of Pine Ridge Road, and is 32.3 acres. The second State regulated wetland, TW-1, extends north from the southern town line between Halseyville Road and Jacksonville Road, ending south of Perry City Road, and is 53.7 acres in size. There are also federally regulated wetlands throughout the Town. The largest is located near Bolter Creek, southeast of Mayo Road, and is approximately 95 acres. The Town adopted a "Wetlands Map for the Town of Ulysses" on July 23, 2019 based on a County 2012 map. It should be noted that on January 1, 2025, changes to 6 NYCRR Part 664, Freshwater Wetlands Mapping and Classification to Freshwater Wetlands Jurisdiction and Classification to implement amendments to the Freshwater Wetlands Act went into effect by NYSDEC. According to NYSDEC, this means that DEC’s regulatory protections of freshwater wetlands will no longer be limited to wetlands depicted on the NYS Freshwater Wetlands Maps. The NYS Freshwater Wetlands Maps will be referred to as Previously Mapped Freshwater Wetlands. Jurisdictional protections for previously mapped freshwater wetlands will remain as DEC’s jurisdictional authority expands to include wetlands meeting the freshwater wetland definition and state jurisdictional criteria for

protection. Jurisdictional determinations and wetland classifications will be made remotely based on wetland acreage and characteristics meeting jurisdictional criteria. A map from May 2025 showing NYSDEC's latest wetland mapping from their Environmental Resources Mapper can be found in the appendix.

### **Floodplains**

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has not updated the Town's Flood Insurance Rate Map (FIRM) since 1987. Most of the Town is outside of the 500-year floodplain, but there are a few special flood hazard areas surrounding Trumansburg Creek, Taughannock Creek, and Bolter Creek.

New FEMA FIRM maps for Town of Ulysses were adopted by the Town Board at their 27 May 2025 meeting, Local Law 2-2025, TB resolution 90-2025. New FIRM maps take effect on 18 June 2025. New FIRM panels applicable to Town of Ulysses are: 36109C0062D, 66D thru 69D, 86D thru 89D, 93D, 152D, 156D and 181D.

### **Soils**

There are several different soil types that comprise the Town of Ulysses. These soils are conducive to farming and especially to growing hay, corn, oats, soybeans, and small grains. As a result, much of the Town is considered to have prime agricultural soils (including if drained) by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

There are also some areas with hydric soils in the Town, which are poorly drained and can indicate the potential presence of a wetland, even in areas that are not officially designated as such.

### **Topography**

The topography in Ulysses varies. Higher elevation areas in the western portion of the Town mostly consists of slopes less than 3 percent, which is suitable for agriculture and most development. There are some areas with steeper slopes, such as those adjacent to creeks and the lakefront.

### **Unique Natural Areas**

The Tompkins County Environmental Management Council maintains an inventory of Unique Natural Areas in the County. The inventory was updated in 2024 and includes nine areas in the Town of Ulysses. In addition to the two DEC mapped wetlands, it includes the following unique natural areas:

- Taughannock Gorge
- Smith Woods
- Hart's Woods
- Willow Creek Glen and Lake Slopes
- Maplewood Glen and Lake Slopes
- Glenwood Ravine and Lake Slopes
- Poyer Orchard Diatrema

In addition, two Natural Features Focus Areas (NFFAs) were identified in the Tompkins County Comprehensive Plan in Ulysses: Taughannock Creek and the Lakeshore. Both provide outdoor recreation, scenic views, and critical habitat and biodiversity benefits. The County identified priority actions for each NFFA to conserve and protect these areas. The Town can also consider designating areas as Critical Environmental Areas (CEAs). NYSDEC defines CEAs as areas in the state which have been designated by a local or state agency to recognize a specific geographical area with one or more of the following characteristics:

- A feature that is a benefit or threat to human health;
- An exceptional or unique natural setting;
- An exceptional or unique social, historic, archaeological, recreational, or educational value; or
- An inherent ecological, geological, or hydrological sensitivity to change that maybe adversely affected by any physical disturbance. .

Having CEA designations can protect the environment during future development as a CEA alerts landowners and developers to the area's significance and triggers special consideration during project evaluations under environmental review processes.

### **Endangered Species**

NYS has a list of endangered, threatened, and special concern species. Some of these species can be found in Ulysses, especially along the coast of Cayuga Lake and within Cayuga Lake itself. According to the NYSDEC Environmental Resource Mapper database, Lake Sturgeon (threatened) and the Bald Eagle (threatened) are two threatened species within the Town of Ulysses. Pinedrops (endangered) are an endangered plant species within Ulysses. According to the New York State National Heritage Program, one population of pinedrops is subject to flooding during severe flood events. The NYSDEC Environmental Resource Mapper also indicates that Ulysses along the coast of Cayuga Lake is in the vicinity of a significant Waterfowl Winter Concentration Area. A full list of state and federal protected species can be found in the appendix.

The Indiana Bat, Tricolored Bat, and Northern Long-eared Bat, and Monarch Butterfly are proposed endangered species that are proposed endangered species that the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) are closely monitoring. To ensure these species and habitats are not adversely impacted by future development projects, consultations and completion of determination keys through their Information for Planning and Consultation (IPaC) web application is strongly encouraged to be used for planning purposes. The IPaC tool is intended streamline the Endangered Species Act (ESA) review process and evaluate potential impacts on USFWS trust resources, including threatened and endangered species and critical habitats.

## **B. Challenges for the Environment and Natural Resources**

Various challenges exist for the environment and natural resources. Climate change can have a significant impact on natural resources including flooding from excessive rain, high temperatures, drought, and water quality for both drinking and recreation.

Having plans and resources in place to deal with natural disasters can help mitigate adverse impacts to both the built and natural environment. The Natural Resources Inventory, County Hazard Mitigation Plan, and Cayuga Lake LWRP that are currently in place are guidance tools that can help with preservation techniques to protect natural resources from climate change and natural disasters.

## **C. Projected Environment and Natural Resources Needs**

- Engaging in hazard mitigation planning and climate change preparedness to protect the environment and natural resources
- Advocating for policies that protect natural resources and address climate change
- Collaborating with local and regional partners on initiatives to protect and enhance natural resources
- Continuing to promote natural resources within the community and the region
- Mitigating adverse impacts of invasive species to protect native vegetation and ecosystems
- Encouraging best management practices to protect water resources
- Thoughtful development that does not destroy or adversely affect natural resources and the natural environment

## **IV. Goals, Objectives, and Policies**

The following section contains the goals, objectives and policies for the Environment and Natural Resources Element of the Comprehensive Plan. This section states the Town's policies for addressing natural resource protection needs of the Town. This section also provides recommendations for local, regional, State, and Federal resources that can be utilized to implement goals centered around environmental sustainability, such as conservation techniques, improving water quality, proactively planning for climate change, and hazard mitigation. Goals, objectives, and policies also focus on collaboration opportunities with local and regional partners to create alignment with initiatives at the Town and Regional level.

The statements of "goals, objectives and policies" are intended to guide the public and those who make decisions about the Town's future. Goals are broad statements of the community's desires. The objective statements are more descriptive and imply actions or programs that will move the Town toward attainment of the goal. The policy statements describe actions to be undertaken for the Town to realize the objectives and goals.

**Goal** Continue to proactively preserve and protect the natural and environmental resources in Ulysses.

**Objective**

**6.1** Work with local and regional entities to protect natural and environmental resources.

**Policies**

- 6.1.1 Actively communicate with the Village of Trumansburg, Tompkins County, institutions, and State/Federal Agencies about collaboration opportunities for conservation efforts and mitigating adverse impacts in Ulysses.
- 6.1.2 Continue to periodically update the Town of Ulysses Natural Resources Inventory as a guide for conservation efforts. Utilize natural resources protection techniques defined such as regulatory tools, non-regulatory tools, and educational programs
- 6.1.3 Actively engage and support the efforts of the Conservation and Sustainability Advisory Council (CSAC) in researching and recommending policies, procedures, and practices to enable the Town to manage and protect its natural resources, and promote environmental sustainability.
- 6.1.4 Continue to advocate for public access and investment to outdoor recreation resources and opportunities, including Taughannock State Park, the Black Diamond Trail, the former Camp Barton, the Jacksonville Community Park, and Town-owned parks."
- 6.1.5 Identify opportunities for implementing initiatives that protect Unique Natural Areas defined in the Tompkins County Environmental Management Council's Unique Natural Areas Inventory. Consider creating Critical Environmental Areas for increased protection of specific habitats or species.
- 6.1.6 Explore ways that the Town could assist with preservation of prime agricultural land and access to it for those wanting to continue farming into the future..
- 6.1.7 Encourage and assist interested landowners in participating in a conservation easement program to protect unique and sensitive environmental features/resources on their property and explore other incentive opportunities that provide for long-term protection of important resources on private land.



**Goal: Protect Water Resources in the Town of Ulysses**

**Objective 6.2:**

**Develop strategies and engage in planning efforts to protect water resources and improve water quality.**

- 6.2.1 Protect streams and their watersheds to maintain water quality, manage stormwater and flooding, and enhance ecological diversity. Develop a town-wide hydrology study as a tool to inform future actions
- 6.2.2 Ensure that future development and planning efforts are in compliance with new NYSDEC wetland regulations enacted as of January 2025 to protect existing wetlands and wetland habitats. Comprehensively re-evaluate streams and wetlands and amend regulations that pertain to and protect them using NYSDEC and USACE standards.
- 6.2.3 Conduct and adopt a Local Waterfront Revitalization Program that incorporates watershed studies and plans. Focus on including permitted uses along the lake shore and waterward, review/permitting processes for proposed work in these areas, and include as part of that a shoreline access plan for new/re-development for all non-residential projects.
- 6.2.4 Encourage proper disposal of hazardous wastes to mitigate contamination into water sources.
- 6.2.5 Identify opportunities for watershed management initiatives, especially to address streambank erosion control as prioritized by the Cayuga Lake LWRP. Collaborate with appropriate partners and agencies for implementation as necessary.
- 6.2.6 Continue to promote best management practices for agriculture, including nutrient management to protect water quality.
- 6.2.7 Explore the feasibility of public water systems in an effort to reduce use of groundwater and reduce environmental impacts.

**Goal Promote Natural Resources within the Town of Ulysses**

**Objective**

**6.3 Promote and support educational opportunities to connect the public with natural resources within Ulysses.**

## **Policies**

- 6.3.1 Support opportunities to expand ecotourism in Ulysses. Collaborate with local institutions and committees to identify opportunities.
- 6.3.2 Work with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to learn about threatened and endangered candidate species. Share resources and measures that can be taken to protect these species with future development as set forth by USFWS.
- 6.3.3 Promote Cayuga Nature Center's Paleontological Research Institution resources to educate the public on biodiversity, local habitats, HABs, and the impact of climate change on natural resources. Encourage in-person visits to the Cayuga Nature Center to connect with the natural environment. Encourage residents to visit Smith Woods to engage more with forestlands.
- 6.3.4 Share resources such as Cornell's Forest Connect to educate the public on ecological functions and sustainable production practices of private woodlands.
- 6.3.5 Continue to promote use of the Black Diamond Trail, Cayuga Nature Center, Jacksonville Park, Salo Habitat Preserve and Taughannock State Park to connect with the natural environment and identify opportunities to educate the public on the natural resources they are comprised of.
- 6.3.6 Maintain and enhance natural areas throughout the Town of Ulysses. Explore funding resources to implement enhancements as time and resources allow.
- 6.3.7 Develop a master plan for Salo Habitat Preserve to guide long-term care.
- 6.3.8 Identify opportunities to incorporate biodiversity and native species as appropriate on town-owned recreation properties.

## **Objective**

- 6.4 Continue to Protect Open Space and Agricultural Land Resources**
  - 6.4.1 Expand on the 2018 NRI analyses to develop and implement an open space plan, and scenic resources inventory .
  - 6.4.2 Identify potential areas that can be designated as a Critical Environment Area, especially to protect areas of concern.