

Chapter 1

PLAN PURPOSE, VISION, PROCESS & TOWN PROFILE

PLAN VISION

Our Vision for Gardiner is to make the Town an even more attractive and vibrant place for people to make their home. To do this we need to solidify the protection of our environment: including saving open space, ensuring water quality, sustaining our climate, and savoring our agricultural heritage. Also, we need to improve Gardiner’s infrastructure and housing options for current residents so we can offer a warm welcome to new families.

PLAN MISSION

The Town of Gardiner is a community of great, active people in a special, rural landscape. This landscape is, and should continue to be, a rich combination of agriculture, recreation and open lands with residential and commercial development serving a growing resident need. The Central hamlet of Gardiner, with other small hamlets at Ireland Corners, Tuthilltown, the Mountain Gateway, and Benton Corners, will continue to provide a vitality and focus for diversity of housing with accessible civic and commercial uses, making for a vibrant community.

Town decisions will help ensure that people have and continue to gain the services they need and want to stay healthy, safe and successful. All development will be designed to be sustainable and resilient in protecting the overall landscape of the Town, notably water resources, the natural, scenic and agricultural features of the Walkill River Valley, and the natural and scenic features of the Shawangunk Ridge.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS COMPREHENSIVE PLAN UPDATE

The Town of Gardiner has adopted Comprehensive Plans in 1992 and 2004. Much has happened since 2004, leading Town leadership to seek this 2022 “Update” to the earlier Plans. This Plan is an Update, as it builds on both the foundation of the 2004 adopted Plan while incorporating new information and recommendations to supplement the earlier Plan.

As a foundation, the majority of the goals and recommendations of the 2004 Plan are still valid but needed to be reviewed and refreshed with new perspectives. They also needed greater clarity and more action to implement, as repeatedly voiced by Town officials and citizens during the public engagement phase of this Plan Update.

As a supplement, this Plan Update brings some important, new elements to the Town Plan. These include:

- Since 2004 Sustainable Gardiner - Goals and Actions towards the Town adapting to a changing climate while ensuring open space protection, and a balance of economic, environmental and community sustainability.
- Housing Diversity & Affordability - Goals and Actions towards the Town meeting both the resident community’s, and share of the region’s, housing needs at a time when a diversity of available housing has been shrinking.
- Senior Needs – Goals and Actions for meeting the needs of resident seniors and older individuals who are a growing sector of the Town but who need unique facilities and services to remain active participants in community.
- Natural Resources Inventory (NRI) – Incorporation of the completed and adopted NRI, which includes documentation of Town important natural, historic and scenic resources, and working landscapes, into the Comprehensive Plan and as a resource for planning and zoning decisions.
- Government Operations – Incorporation of Goals and Actions to maintain and improve a smart and efficient Town government matched to the other Goals of the Comprehensive Plan.

Both the purpose and process of a Town Comprehensive Plan in New York State is guided by State Statute, § 272-a of New York State Town Law. From this Statute, a Town Comprehensive Plan is “...the materials, written and/or graphic, including but not limited to maps, charts, studies, resolutions, reports and other descriptive materials that identify the goals, objectives, principles, guidelines, policies, standards, devices and instruments for the immediate and long-term protection, enhancement, growth and development of the Town ...”

Most important are the stated, statutory purposes of a Town Comprehensive Plan as found in the effect of adoption of the Plan. These are:

- All Town land use regulations must be in accordance with a comprehensive plan adopted pursuant to this section (NYS Town Law § 272-a(11)(a)).
- All plans for capital projects of another government agency on land included in the Town comprehensive plan ... shall take such plan into consideration (NYS Town Law § 272-a(11)(b)).

Finally, the Town of Gardiner agrees to set as ten (10) years the maximum period for review of this Comprehensive Plan.

THE PROCESS OF THIS COMPREHENSIVE PLAN UPDATE

Based on conversations late in 2020 and into early 2022, the Gardiner Town Board advanced a project to “update” the 2004 adopted Town Comprehensive Plan. Working with a professional facilitator and planner, the Town Board decided to retain their lead role in this project and initiate this Update early in the Spring of 2021 with a goal of having a draft Comprehensive Plan Update with time for public review, comment, and formal adoption early in 2022.

Public engagement as well as input and advice from a full range of Town boards, committees, and civic groups is essential and was included. However, the methods for this engagement and outreach was also challenged by the varying realities and requirements during the still active phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than repeat a reliance on in-person public meetings and public opinion survey held back in 2003 and 2004 for the earlier Plan, this Update process emphasized remote and some in-person group interviews with Town boards, committees and civic groups as well as individual interviews, as well as an open invitation, via mailings and on-line, for individuals and organizations to provide the Town comments on the Plan Update. Town Board workshops to discuss the Plan Update were held on September 29, 2021, October 19, 2021 and subsequently at monthly workshops. Finally, a public information meeting was held on November 16, 2021 and a Public Comment Period was open _____ 2022 with a Public Hearing held _____ 2022 for comments on the Draft Comprehensive Plan Update.

Residents were introduced to the Plan Update project and were invited to comment and participate via press releases, regular announcement at Town Board meeting, and a May 2021 Town-wide mailing to some 2600 individuals. Approximately seventy (70) separate invitations were also sent to farmers and farm property owners, introducing the Plan Update project and inviting them to comment directly or to attend a July 20, 2021 special meeting to discuss agriculture in the Town.

During the months of May, June & July, 2021 group interviews were held with a range of Town boards, committees, and civic groups, as well as individual comments received directly via email and phone. Group interviews were scheduled for the convenience of group members. Groups were provided in advance a set of common questions to consider – and these questions were partly built from the public opinion survey done for the 2004 Comprehensive Plan project and input from the Town Supervisor and Deputy Supervisor.

The Town Supervisor met with some of the groups and with individuals, and with her assistant scheduled the group interviews. Three (3) were in-person interviews. These were a Town Hall meeting with Gardiner Senior Resource Committee, a meeting at Majestic Park of farmers and farm property

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owners, and a meeting with the Gardiner Fire Department. All other interviews used a combination of Zoom and phone-in options, reflecting COVID-19 protocols. Interviews with official Town boards and committees were recorded and were conducted as public meetings with a quorum of the applicable members present, along with members of the public able to observe.

The following group interviews a, all held in 2021, are a part of this summary:

Climate Smart Gardiner Task Force	June 2
Town of Gardiner Planning Board	June 3
Gardiner Fire Department	June 7
Gardiner Library staff	June 9
Town of Gardiner Open Space Commission	June 14
Gardiner Senior Resource Committee	June 15
Town of Gardiner Parks & Recreation Committee	June 17
Gardiner Association of Business	June 28
Town of Gardiner Environmental Conservation Commission	June 30
Open Meeting w Farmers & Farm Property Owners (18 farmers / farm property owners)	July 20

An additional Zoom/phone meeting was held July 1 for those members above who were unable to attend the earlier group interviews.

Over two dozen individual written comments were received – some as follow up from individuals in group interviews, and some from other individuals via phone or email. The Town Superintendent of Highways and representatives of Wallkill River Watershed Association, Riverkeeper, and Mohonk Preserve also replied individually.

Comments included various attachments and documents. Notable are:

- ❖ *Seniors Enrich Gardiner*, A Study of Comparable Towns prepared by Stephen Weir & the Gardiner Senior Resource Committee
- ❖ Drainage Districts – various background documentation gathered by Brian Stiscia, Town Superintendent of Highways
- ❖ Aquifers – various studies and documentation on these Town resources – gathered by Michael Hartner, Chair, Town of Gardiner Environmental Conservation Commission.
- ❖ Outdoor Recreation, including *Riverbend Trails at Gardiner Park*, and *Gardiner Needs Trails*.

A report more fully summarizing the Public Engagement and public comments received is Appendix C of this Comprehensive Plan Update.

TOWN PROFILE

Based on public engagement and comments received from Town officials and residents, several key issues were identified requiring some background on conditions and trends to supplement or update similar information specific to the Town of Gardiner found in the 2004 Comprehensive Plan.

Demographics

A return to growth after two decades of ups and downs?

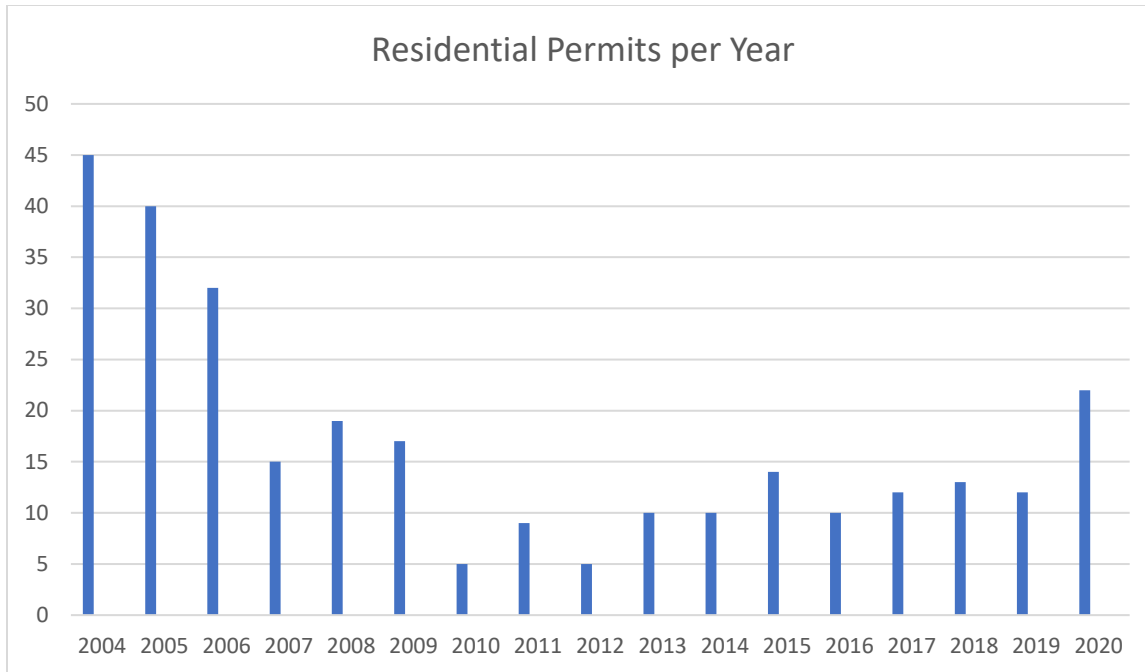
As noted in the 2004 Town Comprehensive Plan, the earlier 1992 Comprehensive Plan was adopted in a time of housing and economic recovery that formed the basis for significant changes to the Town's zoning regulations. By 2003 and 2004, when the more recent Plan was researched and adopted, recovery was happening. More housing was approved and built in the 1990s than in any prior post-world war decade. For example, the 2000 US Decennial Census counted the Town of Gardiner as the second fastest growing Town in Ulster County, with a 10- year population growth of nearly 23%, surpassed only slightly by the growth rate in the adjoining Town of Rochester to the west.

Growth continued in subsequent years with 5238 residents in 2000 and 5713 residents in 2010, a 9.1% increase and a rate then surpassed in Ulster County by only the Town of Hardenburgh and similar to the rate of the adjoining Town of Shawangunk. However, more recent US Census estimates show, after a population peak estimated at 5723 in 2011, growth stagnated then had a minor decline to 5598 estimated population in 2019. This stagnation is attributed to economic trends and lowering household sizes and birth rates throughout the region.

Anecdotally, this growth rate may be shifting again while the latest Comprehensive Plan Update was researched. Birth rates are still relatively low, but residential interest in Gardiner and the region is high as households seek the safety and attractiveness of rural residential living in reasonable travel proximity to metropolitan New York during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and 2021.

The graph below shows this variability in Town growth as tracked by the annual number of residential building permits issued by the Town since 2004 when the last Comprehensive Plan was adopted. After a peak of 45 residential permits in 2004 and 40 in 2005, the number dropped to 5 in 2010 and stayed below 12 annually until 2020 when permits nearly doubled to 22.

FIGURE 1



An aging population.

Another important population trend is age. Gardiner, like much of the Mid Hudson region, is located in a region experiencing steady growth in the percent of population over 65 of age. For example, in 2010 the US Census demographic profile for the Town showed 703 individuals or 12.3% of the total population as over 65 years, but by the 2019 US Census estimate that had grown to 1035 individuals over 65 years or 18.5% of total Town population.

Land Use

As detailed in the Town of Gardiner Open Space Plan, adopted in 2007, the Town is rural and dominated by farms, rural residential properties on larger parcels, concentrated mixed use hamlet development notably in the central hamlet of Gardiner, and some limited suburban style residential subdivisions. An estimated 4600 acres or 16% of Town land is in rural residential use, while some 3600 acres or 13% of the land is vacant. The west 1/3 of the Town is on or borders the Shawangunk Ridge where state park and other preserved open space dominates with occasional large lot rural residences off limited public road access.

About one-fifth of the Town’s 28,600 acres has been and remains in active agriculture, and that activity is rising. As reported by the Ulster County Planning Department, some 7730 acres in Gardiner were listed in 2005 in the County Agricultural District program, which rose to 7829 acres on 245 parcels by 2021.

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In 2020 the Town also completed a Natural Resources Inventory (NRI) through a collaboration with and technical assistance from Cornell University and the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) Hudson River Estuary Program. From the NRI, of the Town’s approximately 28,600 acres, 6581 acres or 23% is “public or protected lands”, an increase of some 1300 acres since the analysis for the 2007 adopted Town Open Space Plan. Much of this increase can be attributed to additions to Minnewaska State Park, with some additions to farmland preservation. In 2020 these lands consist of:

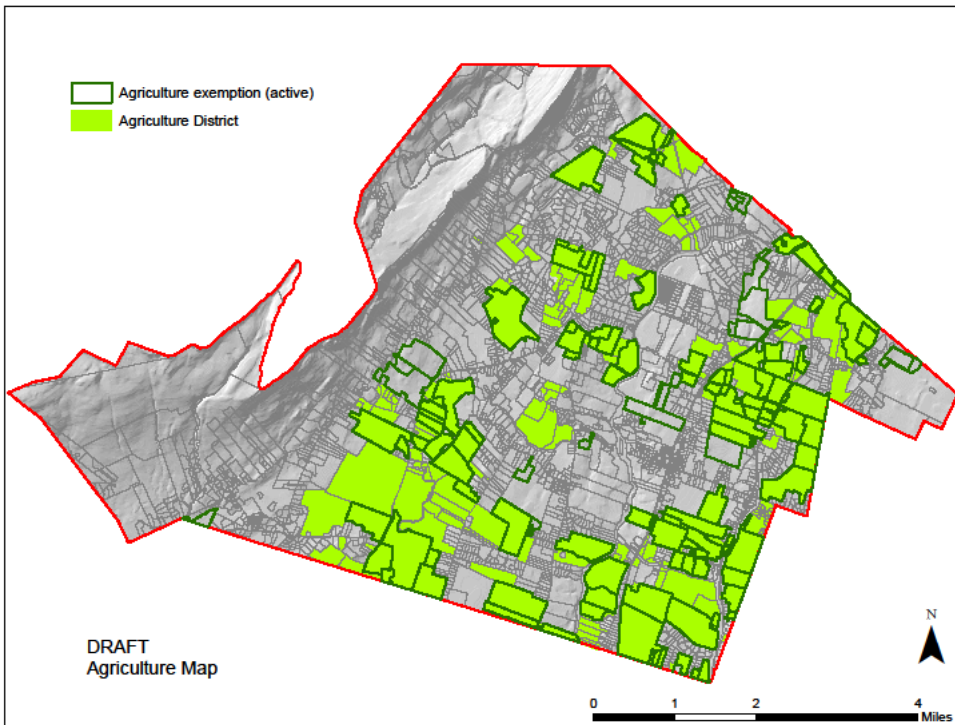
Minnewaska State Park 2890 acres
 Mohonk Preserve 1966 acres
 Town parks & lands 275 acres
 Other land owners 1450 acres

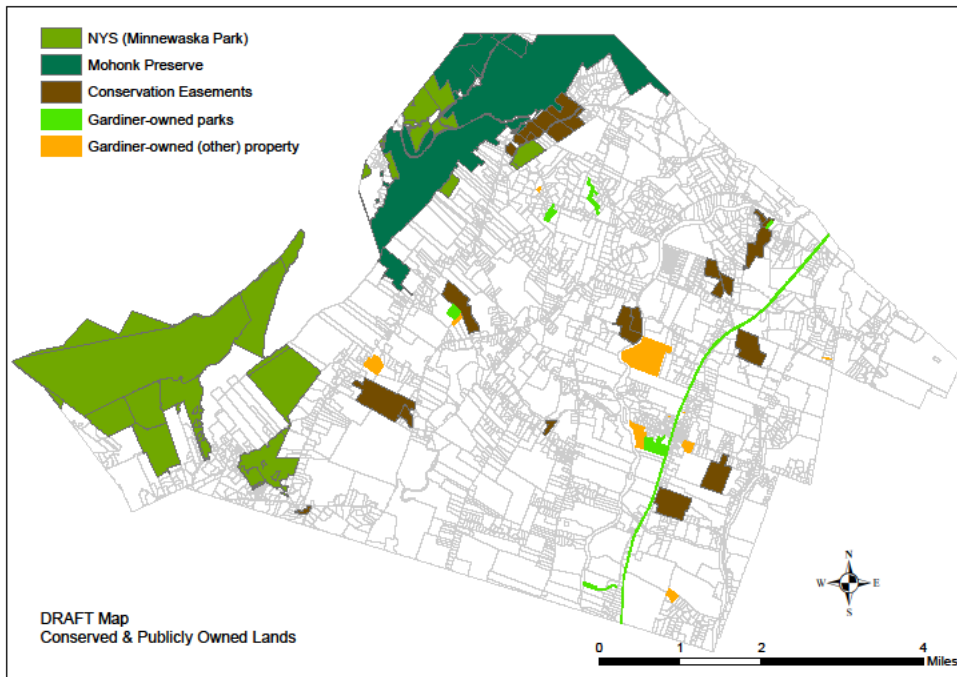
Based on NYS Office of Real Property Tax Services data, in 2008 versus 2020 the Town of Gardiner land parcels were distributed in the following uses:

Land Use Category	Number of Parcels in 2008	Number of Parcels in 2020
Agriculture	97	88
Residential	2085	2187
Vacant	552	505
Commercial	106	109
Recreation/Entertainment	6	8
Community Service	12	12
Industrial	3	4
Public Service	29	30
Public Parks, Wild, Forested & Conservation	32	41
TOTAL	2922	2984

Clearly, land use patterns changed little in recent decade and one half, with the exception that some vacant parcels were developed for residential use or dedicated to conservation, and agriculture saw a minor decline in parcels in active use as a few parcels were likely converted to residential use. Reflecting active farming, NYS Office of Real Property Tax Services also reports some 1407 agricultural tax parcel exemptions in 2020, down from 1858 in 2008. However, this appears offset by a modest increase in active and viable farm acreage being added to the County Agricultural District in this same time period which still shows nearly ¼ of the town acreage listed in Ulster County Agricultural District 2.

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In 2004, as part of the Town Comprehensive Plan research, an analysis of potential full build out of the Town showed that if every land parcel with reasonable development potential was developed, the Town could see some 4274 new homes adding over 11,000 people to the population. Whether such “full build out” might ever happen is questionable. Yet in 2008, four (4) years after adoption of the previous Town Comprehensive Plan, this potential combined with other trends and concerns led the Town leadership to substantially revise the zoning code from an earlier version approved in the early 1990s. This revision included establishment of three (3) tiers of zoning for the western 1/3 of the Town dominated by the Shawangunk Ridge where 5 acre, 10 acre, and 20 acre minimum lot sizes were set. Also, changes were made to the RA zoning district, and a series of new overlay protection zones were established, all together mitigating the full build out potential of the Town.

In real terms, residential development in the Town, as shown in Land Use Map above, has been well below full build out potential, averaging some 17 new residential units per year since 2004.

LAND USE NEEDS OR TRENDS WORTH ATTENTION

As recurrently highlighted during the public engagement comments from Town officials and residents, there are some more specific land use needs and trends worthy of Town attention and action. These include:

- Sustainability and Climate Adaptation
- Livability, including Traffic, Walkability & Recreation
- Housing

SUSTAINABILITY

Since the 2004 adoption of the prior Comprehensive Plan, regional interest and action in sustainability has become prominent. This is also true in Gardiner as emphasized by the number of studies and policy documents published and by the active work of Gardiner Climate Smart Task Force. The Town in 2018 has also pledged to be part of the NYS Climate Smart Communities Program and in September 2021, after implementing several actions, gained NYS bronze-level certification as a Climate Smart Community.

Issues of sustainability have focused on climate change adaptation and resiliency as well as reduction of greenhouse gas emissions (GHG). In 2018 the Town released a revised Greenhouse Gas Inventory followed by a 2019 Town Climate Action Plan, both based on work with the Climate Action Planning Institute and on the 2012 Mid Hudson Regional GHG Emissions Inventory prepared as part of the Mid Hudson (seven county) Regional Sustainability Plan.

The most significant sources of GHG emissions in Gardiner are mobile transportation (cars and trucks) and residential buildings, notably heating and cooling. However, emissions in Gardiner are similar to those in other locations in Ulster County and are notably lower than those found in the seven (7) county region.

The Town Climate Action Plan looks first to a goal of reducing government operations GHG emissions 20% by 2022 over the average annual baseline levels from 2015 thru 2017 using a variety of actions. These include focus on energy consumption in both Town facilities and residences, and on transportation improvements both for the Town vehicle fleet as well as for residents. Specific to Town vehicle fleet, a goal of 15% reduction of GHG emissions by 2022 has been set in the 2019 Town Climate Action Plan. The schedule for these targeted goals will need adjustment. The Town is also actively pursuing streetlight conversions to LED lamps and the Community Choice Aggregation (CCA) option in energy procurement.

LIVABILITY

Thanks to input from the Gardiner Senior Resource Committee, “livability” has been raised as an important concept for the Town. The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) has created a Livability Index using statistics from seven (7) categories to rank communities as livable – offering safe and secure choices to live and get around that are equitable for all ages, ability levels, incomes, race, ethnicities, and other backgrounds.

Using a scale of 0 to 100, the AARP Livability Index scores Gardiner as 44 overall – a score similar to the nearby municipalities including the County. This mid level score is further defined as:

Housing affordability & access	35
Neighborhood access to life, work & play	32
Transportation safe & convenient options	40
Environment clean air & water	54
Health prevention, access and quality	48

Engagement civic & social involvement 53

Opportunity inclusion & possibilities 45

Looking further into the metrics used for the Livability Index, Gardiner’s strengths are in environment and civic engagement metrics, but housing costs, lack of public transit access and reduced walkable proximity to employment, recreation, and other community facilities are reported as limited.

As part of livability, walkable and bikeable access for Gardiner residents to businesses, jobs, and services including recreation was a strong recurring request from the public engagement process for this Plan Update. Walk Score is a walkability index for communities and locations maintained by the Walk Score company (a division of Redfin real estate company) as an outcome of work by the Sightline Institute. Using the ¼ mile or 5 minute walk or less as best, and walks beyond 30 minutes not scoring, scores above 50 of 100 are rated as walkable while below 50 are car-dependent.

Overall Gardiner is ranked 22, being car dependent, as almost all errands require a car. However, the hamlet of Gardiner is a neighborhood where walking 30 minutes or less travel time does now provide access to a number of important business, recreation and civic facilities including public library, post office, and Town offices.

Recreation needs are a key component of livability. According to the National Recreation and Park Association, a typical local government park system has at least one park for every 2281 residents and some 9.9 acres of parkland per 1000 residents, as well as approximately 11 miles of trails. Thanks to some 275 acres of municipal park complementing the presence of the Wallkill Valley Rail Trail and various trails and facilities in the Minnewaska State Park system, as well as within the private Mohonk Preserve, the Town of Gardiner easily exceeds these thresholds. But again, accessibility is important, as many residents still rely on cars for access; and in recent years trails and facilities have become crowded with the influx of visitors.

Finally, traffic safety is a growing livability concern as again voiced during the public engagement process and punctuated by a sense of rising traffic volumes, particularly on weekends, and by recent traffic accident incidents. As part of the on-going Ulster County Road Safety Plan, concerns about traffic safety have highlighted certain locations in the Town of Gardiner. The Town hosts 3 of the 10 road segments and intersections found in Ulster County where crash trends, traffic counts, and roadway characteristics have become priority locations for the Ulster County Transportation Council. These are:

Roadway Segment NYS Route 44/55 at the hairpin curve leading up the Shawangunk Ridge

Intersection NYS Routes 44/55 & County Route 7 (Brunswick Rd)

Intersection NYS Routes 44/55 & Route 208 (Ireland Corners)

At the time of this Plan Update, there is particular focus on prompt safety improvements at the intersection of NYS Routes 44/55 and County Route 7.

HOUSING

The 2021 Ulster County Housing Action Plan provides important background and insight into housing challenges and cost burdens for too many residents throughout the County and including the Town of Gardiner. While these challenges and burdens have existed for many years and have accumulated over time, a review of recent findings relevant to Gardiner is important.

Key findings include:

- ❖ Rents are up but renter incomes are down. Since 2010 the median rent in Ulster County increased 16% while median household income of renters decreased 1%
- ❖ Home prices are rising. Single home prices rose 17% from 2013 to 2019, and prices are recently spiking as demand outstrips supply.
- ❖ Cost burdens are real. In the County 13% of homeowners and 30% of renters spend more than half (+50%) of their total income on housing costs.

For the Town of Gardiner, the 2021 Housing Action Plan has more specifics – both good and bad – that together contribute to important housing challenges.

In Gardiner the poverty rate is relatively low and shrinking. From 2012 to 2018 that rate dropped from 11.6% to 8% and remains one of the lowest throughout Ulster County where the poverty rate increased from 12.9% to 13.9% in the same years. Also, median household incomes in Gardiner remain high for the region, at \$76,643 in 2019 according to US Census estimates versus \$64,304 for Ulster County in 2019. Yet Gardiner saw a near 10% decline in median household income from 2010 to 2018 focused entirely on the lowest three fifths (3/5) of household incomes, as incomes for the highest two fifths (2/5) continued to rise.

Housing stock is where the challenges become apparent. Of the 2549 total housing units in the Town of Gardiner, 78% are owner occupied while 22% are renter occupied – rates common in the County and region. However, the Town vacancy rate of 4% is the lowest in Ulster County.

Adding costs and income into housing availability accentuates the challenges. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the US Census Bureau publishes data on “housing cost burden” known as the Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategy (CHAS). Using this data, the Ulster County Housing Action Plan has identified the Town of Gardiner as the most severely cost burdened municipality in the County. Over 26% of households in the Town spend more than fifty percent (+50%) of their gross household income on housing costs. For homeowners such costs are mortgage payments, utilities, any association fees, insurance, and property taxes. For renters such costs are rent plus utilities.

This severe household cost burden in Gardiner is a substantially important condition for the Town; however, as also reported in the 2021 Ulster County Housing Action Plan, analysis using the United Way ALICE project methodology shows Gardiner still challenged by household financial burdens but at a level more common to the County. ALICE (standing for Asset Limited Income Constrained and Employed) calculates a minimum survival household budget using conservative costs for such expenses as housing, childcare, food, transportation, health care, technology cost, and taxes.

Using ALICE, in 2018 some 39% of Gardiner household incomes are below the ALICE threshold for minimum survival incomes, compared to 42% County-wide. Most important, some 19% of Town households fit below ALICE minimum household incomes but above the poverty rate, meaning too many households are working families who earn enough to be ineligible for key government assistance.