

GLEANINGS FROM THE CORN FLATS: Help plan Niskayuna's future

By Denis Brennan/For The Daily Gazette | June 4, 2023

NISKAYUNA – As Niskayuna's town historian, today I am entering unfamiliar territory. This month's article is intended to inspire a focus on the town's future rather than its past.

Nevertheless, in the spirit of William Faulkner's famous quote, "The past is never dead. It's not even past," I now urge you to consider Niskayuna a decade from now and contribute to the process of using our past — even the recent past — to create plans for Niskayuna's future.

A committee of town residents, including the town historian, are busy developing a new comprehensive plan that encapsulates a long-term vision for what Niskayuna will be in the next decade. We need your input and perspective.

Comprehensive plans essentially establish guidelines for community growth, effective governance, balanced development, appropriate use of cultural and historical community resources, diverse housing, safe transportation systems and useful public facilities (i.e., parks, recreation and open space). Furthermore, such a plan enables a proactive response to change, helps guide orderly growth and development, allows the town to identify influences that shape community interests, guides decision making and maintains stability as town leadership changes.

The origin of town planning in Niskayuna can arguably be credited to a group of residents, led by W. Garner Bee, who reimagined the 140-acre Shopmeier farm as a suburban residential development in 1908. Housing lots were surveyed, streets laid out, roads graded, trees planted and homes built.

By 1923, the Grand Boulevard area (what today we call "Old Niskayuna") was well established. Although not "comprehensive" nor town-wide, Bee and other town citizens were contemplating and actively planning a future for Niskayuna.

Probably in response to the growth around Grand Boulevard as well as the consequence of growth in the city of Schenectady, more formal town-wide planning emerged in 1929. Zoning regulations were established and, over the next 30 years, routinely revised to "accommodate uses as diverse and innovative [for the time] as television broadcasting studios and shopping malls."

The first town plan that could be labeled "comprehensive" appeared in 1963. The town had grown threefold since 1929, and after studying population growth, community facilities, public utilities and town roadways, new zoning regulations sought to place some control on "the conversions of raw land into building sites." The past is indeed prologue: Today, 60 years later, this issue remains a principal concern regarding housing and development.

Before the end of the decade it became clear that the first plan needed revision, and a second comprehensive plan was prepared and released in 1971. Many of the recommendations of the 1971 plan regarding land use, transportation and conservation were achieved. Perhaps the most success was in parks and recreation: The plan recommended “the Town undertake a program to correct the present lack of park and recreation facilities.” Niskayuna’s current system of parks can be credited to the foresight of town planners in 1971.

The 1971 plan was updated with new comprehensive plans in 1983, 1993 and 2003. Each represented an acknowledgement that changing demographics and institutional patterns over the prior decade necessitated reevaluation of the previous plan. Each new plan was perceived as “an appropriate time to pause in order to review the past and assess the present — in order that the future might be better.”

A sixth comprehensive plan for Niskayuna was created in 2013. Rather than simply updating previous plans, the new plan started fresh. While the plan maintained continuity with earlier documents, its most unique enhancement was an analysis of town-wide issues as they affected each of 20 distinct neighborhoods. In addition, the committee recognized the importance of a variety of characteristics that made Niskayuna a desirable place to live. The goals, objectives and implementation tasks defined by the 2013 plan strove “to preserve and build on these ‘livability factors’ that give Niskayuna its identity.”

Few people would question the wisdom of planning. To paraphrase Poor Richard (i.e., Ben Franklin), we are all well aware that “failing to plan equals planning to fail.” But plans do fail — for a variety of reasons, including: because they were so intricately detailed that essential policies and actions are lost in minutia; because implementation strategies for the plan recommendations are poorly defined; because progress in accomplishing implementation is not well monitored; or because town officials and community leaders are not fully vested in the success of the plan.

But perhaps the most important reason for a plan’s failure is lack of community participation in both the creation and implementation of the plan. We are a diverse community, and every voice in the community needs to be heard. The 2023 comprehensive plan remains to be written and, as I indicated earlier, we need your input — in the creation phase — to complete a final and effective document.

A survey will be made available early this month and all town residents are encouraged to complete it. Niskayuna is a wonderful place to live; be a part of deciding what needs to be done to keep it that way. It is time, once again, to review the past, assess the present and envision our future.

We encourage any past or present town residents to contact Niskayuna Town Historian Denis Brennan at dbrennan@niskayuna.org regarding any information, resources or stories they might like to share about Niskayuna’s distinctive history