

2024 Otsego County Housing Needs Assessment Update

By: Otsego County Planning Dept. &
Otsego Rural Housing Assistance, Inc.



Otsego County Planning Dept.
planning@otsegocountyny.gov
607-547-4225



Otsego Rural Housing Assistance, Inc.
orha@otsegoruralhousing.org
607-286-7244

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Introduction

The purpose of this assessment is to profile Otsego County's existing housing stock against the County's population trends, project future needs, and use this information to prioritize housing-related projects in the County.

The last update to Otsego County's Housing Study was completed in 2019, and listed the following recommendations:

- 1. Encourage municipalities to apply for funding for home repair/rehabilitation*
- 2. Encourage development of housing (through incentives, collaboration) for low-income individuals/families below HUD fair market rates.*
- 3. Encourage the development of more affordable senior housing.*
- 4. Coordinate housing activities and shared information among municipalities. There is no central direction of housing development in the County now and each agency/ government is working on their own.*
- 5. Continue to maintain a presence in the Continuum of Care and other related groups and push for more federal and state funding from them*

The study also noted possible stabilization of the summer rental market, housing needs for the aging population, an aging housing stock, a lack of housing for professionals, population loss, and a higher poverty rate.¹

Unfortunately, the 2019 study could not have possibly predicted the impact of the subsequent COVID-19 Pandemic on both housing and population, which left many of the recommendations from the 2019 study unresolved.

Since then, the Pandemic has presented rural communities with unique challenges. A 2023 report by the Office of NYS Comptroller DiNapoli examined ten rural counties in New York, two of which border Otsego County. The report describes population decline, an aging population, a shrinking labor force (including low labor force participation rates), and a reliance on government employment when compared to the rest of New York State.

The report also described the following challenges for rural New York communities: a declining number of housing units and high vacancy rates, access to health care (including the opioid epidemic) and food (distance to these services were a factor), and lower rates of broadband service.²

Nationally, the United States is facing a housing affordability crisis. A report published by Redfin, an online real estate company, found that 16% of home listings on its website were affordable in 2023 (no more than 30% of the local median household income), down from 21%

¹ 2018-2019 Housing Internship Report

² Rural New York: Challenges and Opportunities

in 2022 and over 40% before the Pandemic spurred a “home buying boom.”³ High interest rates and a low inventory of housing stock have contributed to this issue.⁴

In March 2024, the National Low Income Housing Coalition published a housing gap analysis which found that the shortage of affordable rental housing primarily impacts those with extremely low incomes (income at or below the Federal poverty line or 30% of area median income [AMI]). This shortage worsened with the Pandemic. 87% of extremely low-income renters are cost-burdened by rent. Finally, the Coalition determined all 50 states in the country have an inadequate supply of housing for low-income renters.⁵

In both the Redfin and National Low Income Housing Coalition reports, the housing crisis disproportionately impacted minority populations.

Several of these trends are echoed locally. The 2023 Opportunities for Otsego (OFO) Community Needs Assessment summarized population change in Otsego County, showing an estimated 6.0% decline in population from 2010 to 2020. The aging population (65+) continues to grow as most other age groups decline in numbers. The poverty rate has remained fairly consistent from 2017 to 2021, at an average of 13.7%.

OFO also profiled housing trends using American Community Survey (ACS) data. The number of housing units in Otsego County has decreased by 2.61%, not a significant reduction, but notable given the other dimensions of the current housing crisis. Compounding the housing challenges in Otsego County is its aging housing stock (69.2% built before the 1978 lead paint ban). While there may be a slightly smaller and certainly aging housing stock, there has been limited new housing. New housing permits have averaged 64 permits for single family units and 39 permits for multi-family units annually from 2012 to 2022, according to data from the US Census (this needs assessment will use data directly from the County Code Enforcement office, which serves all but five of the County’s 34 municipalities).

OFO’s report also summarizes market data from the New York Association of Realtors. Following national trends, housing sale prices in Otsego County increased by 47.2% from 2018 to 2023. The report uses ACS data to estimate that 36.9% of homeowners and 44.5% of renters in the County are “cost burdened” compared to 38.9% statewide and a third nationally.⁶

Planning Trends in Housing

One response to the housing crisis calls for zoning and development reform. In recent years, this has centered around principles within Smart Growth. Smart Growth is a community development concept that encourages principles such as mixed use buildings, diverse housing

³ <https://www.redfin.com/news/share-of-homes-affordable-new-2023/>

⁴ <https://www.gao.gov/blog/affordable-housing-crisis-grows-while-efforts-increase-supply-fall-short>

⁵ <https://nlihc.org/gap>

⁶ Housing Cost Burdens for New Yorkers Among Nation’s Highest. DiNapoli, Thomas. 2/14/2024.

options, development within existing communities (instead of building out), preserving farmland and open space, walkable neighborhoods, and a sense of place.⁷

Nationwide, communities are amending zoning laws to allow for multifamily housing, tiny homes, and other non-traditional single-family housing types in residential neighborhoods in an effort to increase housing stock.⁸ Some communities are adopting Inclusionary Zoning policies (in contrast to the traditional Exclusionary Zoning of low-income and minority populations). These policies use requirements and tax incentives to promote affordable housing.⁹

Often, these concepts are described in the context of urban communities. However, the City of Oneonta is the only city government in Otsego County. Outside of the City, the County's predominantly rural towns are marked by small, concentrated populations of villages and hamlets, for which some of these planning concepts could be applied. In New York State, local governments include counties, cities, towns, and villages. Hamlets, however, are communities within a town that do not have their own government.¹⁰

This assessment will characterize housing and population trends in Otsego County and, following planning trends and concepts, consider where there is a concentrated need for housing-related projects.

Research Objectives

1. **Current Demographics and Housing Stock:** *Inventory and assess the current demographics and housing stock in order to better understand housing access and affordability in Otsego County.*
2. **Identifying and Delineating Housing Needs:** *Identify and delineate areas containing a significant density of 'need' for housing projects, wherein 'need' is broadly defined to include projects ranging from minor repairs to major replacement efforts.*
3. **Hamlets: Scale, Housing Stock, and the Dynamics of Need, Availability, and Affordability:** *Perform a scalar analysis of housing stock across Otsego County, with particular focus on understanding the dynamics of needs, availability, and affordability at the hamlet scale.*
4. **Projected Transitions in Demographics and Housing:** *Utilize historical population data to predict likely future demographic transitions and associated change in housing needs in Otsego County.*
5. **Priorities**

⁷ <https://smartgrowthamerica.org/what-is-smart-growth/>

⁸ https://planning-org-uploaded-media.s3.amazonaws.com/publication/download_pdf/2024-Trend-Report-for-Planners.pdf

⁹ <https://inclusionaryhousing.org/inclusionary-housing-explained/what-is-inclusionary-housing/>

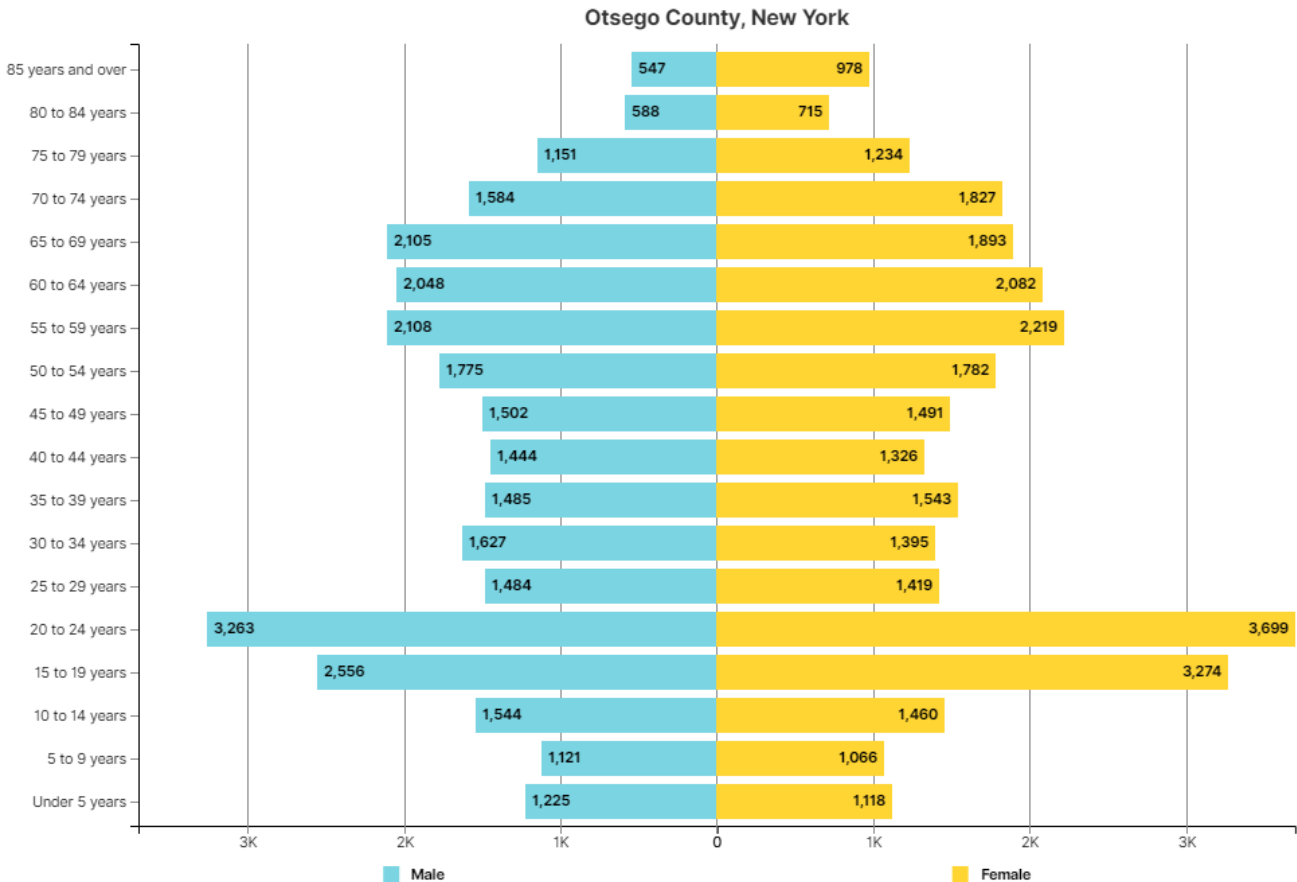
¹⁰ <https://www.townofbabylon.com/639/What-is-a-Hamlet>

1 Current Demographics and Housing Stock

1.1. Population Demographics

Between 2010 and 2020, the total population of Otsego County decreased 5.9% to 58,524 (U.S. Census Decennial 2020). A declining population certainly contributes towards further complicating housing issues in any area, but of course, it does not explain any housing challenge on its own. Population change, be it increasing or decreasing, is one of many data sets which can be used to take inventory of a study area.

Figure 1. Population Pyramid: Population by Age and Sex in Otsego County, New York



Margin of Error
S0101 | 2022 ACS 5-Year Estimates Subject Tables

Source: data.census.gov

Otsego County’s estimated 2022 population pyramid is inverted, indicating a growing aging population among fewer working-age adults and children. There is one exception: a large population of individuals aged 15-19 years and 20-24 years, which is representative of the two higher education institutions in the County, a group that largely resides in the County while classes are in session, but then return to their homes elsewhere during breaks. Unless there is

significant change, this pyramid is not indicative of future population growth and can indicate a growing need for senior-friendly communities, as well as a need for solutions to the challenge of finding affordable rentals for year-round residents in a competitive student-housing rental market.¹¹

Otsego County’s population is predominantly white, with 89.5% of the County’s population identifying as “White alone”, compared to a Statewide percentage of 61.6%. Municipalities with a larger percentage of people who identify as something other than “White alone” consist of the City of Oneonta (17.7%), the Town of Oneonta (14.3%), and the Village of Cooperstown (14.1%).¹²

Table 1.

Place:	Race: White alone	Race: all others
Otsego County	89.5%	10.5%
City of Oneonta	82.3%	17.7%
Town of Oneonta	85.7%	14.3%
Village of Cooperstown	85.9%	14.1%

Approximately 14% of the County’s population reported having a disability. Municipalities with a larger percentage of people with disabilities consist of the Town of Maryland (30.2%) and the hamlet of Schenevus (29.1%).¹³ It should be noted that Schenevus is a hamlet within the Town of Maryland. These communities may have the greatest need for accessible housing and accessible community facilities, such as public transportation.

Table 2. Percentage of Population Reporting Disabilities

Place:	Percentage of People with Disabilities
Otsego County	14.0%
Town of Maryland	30.2%
Schenevus	29.1%

Otsego County residents are primarily driving alone to work, while a relatively comparable number of residents carpool, walk to work, or work from home. Those that are commuting to work are mostly traveling up to 30-34 minutes from their homes¹⁴.

¹¹ <https://data.census.gov/vizwidget?g=050XX00US36077&infoSection=Age%20and%20Sex>

¹² U.S. Decennial Census, 2020

¹³ U.S. Census Bureau, 2017-2021 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

¹⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, 2018-2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Table 3. Means of Transportation to Work

Means of Transportation	Count
Car, Truck, or Van	22,200
Drove Alone	19,820
Carpooled (total)	2,380
Worked from Home	2,280
Walked	2,002

Table 4. Commute Times for Residents of Otsego County

Less than 5 mins	5-9 mins	10-14 mins	15-19 mins	20-24 mins	25-29 mins	30-34 mins	35-39 mins	40-44 mins	45-59 mins	60-89 mins	90 or more mins
1,177	4,234	3,519	4,104	2,927	1,604	2,787	965	558	1,257	993	673

In general, Otsego County’s population is aging, mostly white, and has some areas with a greater number of people with disabilities. The working population in Otsego County is currently shrinking, but those that do live in the County may experience half-hour commutes while driving alone in their own vehicle. The County has a proportionately large population of young adults for part of the year due to having two higher education institutions in Oneonta.

1.2 Housing Supply, Characteristics, and Market

1.2.1 Housing Supply

Between 2010 and 2020 the number of housing units in Otsego County declined from 30,777 units to 29,838 housing units.¹⁵ Concurrently, the population of Otsego County declined by 5.9% over the same period of time. Further complicating the housing landscape was a consistently high vacancy rate. The 2020 Decennial Census reported an available housing vacancy rate of 5.1% for Otsego County, greater than either the nation (3.8%) or the state (3.3%). This represents a 17.4% increase in the vacancy rate since 2010.¹⁶ The 2020 rental vacancy rate in the county was particularly high, sitting at 11.9%, while the homeowner vacancy rate was at 2.2%. Some of this elevated rental vacancy rate may be due to the nature of the rental market in Otsego County, which in addition to year-round rental housing contains student rental housing in Oneonta, shorter-term rental housing for traveling medical personnel near the major medical centers, and short-term tourist rentals that are often also offered for unattractive off-season only leases.

These vacancy rates represent the vacant available housing in the county. Indicative of Otsego County’s status as a tourist destination, an additional 11% of housing units were vacant due to

¹⁵ U.S. Census Bureau 2020 Decennial

¹⁶ U.S. Census Bureau 2010 Decennial

seasonal, recreational, or occasional use, nearly four times the rate for either the state or the nation. Given the high number of elderly residents in the county, some portion of that 11% may also be the homes of retired seasonal residents. Another 4.7% of homes were reported as "all other vacants," which includes housing for migrant workers and homes kept vacant for reasons not available in the Census questionnaire, such as the owner's personal reasons or for repair or renovation. In all, 15.8% of housing in the county was unavailable to local residents.

U.S. Census ACS data often contain high margins of error, however, it is interesting to note that the 2018-2022 ACS 5-Year Estimates estimated Otsego County to have an overall available housing vacancy rate of 4.2%, compared to 2.7% across the country and 2.5% across the state. The homeowner vacancy rate was estimated at 1.9%, while the rental vacancy rate was estimated at 9.8%. According to the ACS estimates, 20.9% of housing units were unavailable to local residents.

While the vacancy rate for households is higher than the State and Federal rates, indicating some availability of housing, there are many additional factors to consider when assessing housing supply. In particular, the assessment must take into account the quality of housing (i.e. those lacking utilities, kitchen, plumbing, etc.), the socioeconomic status and demographics of the population, as well as the local market conditions. An update to the nation's housing stock was released by the U.S. Census Bureau via its 2023 ACS Survey. The estimate of total housing units in Otsego County in 2023 was 30,194, an increase of 229 units (+0.76%) from the 2022 ACS estimates.¹⁷

1.2.2 Housing Characteristics

When conducting a housing needs assessment, it's important to understand more detailed characteristics of the housing landscape, including both the historic and present state of the housing stock, resident population, short-term rentals, ownership, facilities/utilities, and local market conditions. Information regarding household size and type can reflect an area's demographics, such as in Otsego County where we have a significant retired population and a large 18-22 year old college population. Although the college student population is consistent during the academic year, the students themselves most often leave Otsego County each summer and after graduation.

Within Otsego County the two most numerous household sizes are 1-person (7,662) and 2-person (8,646), reflecting the retiree and college student cohorts.¹⁸ As the *size* of households reflect broader socioeconomic and demographic status, so too do the *types* of households in a community. Approximately 10,965 or 49% of the households in the County are occupied by married couples (over 50% if we include "cohabiting-couple" households), with the majority of those married couples not having children under the age of 18 (2022 ACS Survey). Approximately 44% of households are for either single female (5,486) or single-male (4,339) householders.

¹⁷ https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/snapshot-of-nations-housing-stock-2023.html?utm_campaign=20240614msdvzs1ccdtanl&utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery

¹⁸ id.

Table 5. Household Type in Otsego County

Type:	Total:	With Children Under 18:	Without Children Under 18:
Married-couple	10,965	3,143	7,822
Cohabiting-couple	1,658	536	1,122
Single-female householder	5,486	695	Live alone: 3,807 With relatives: 797 With non-relatives: 187
Single-male householder	4,339	415	Live alone: 3,021 With relatives: 629 With non-relatives: 274

Building Age:

Otsego County is not alone in navigating the challenge of an ‘aging’ housing stock, something many other rural counties of the U.S. are facing.¹⁹ As of 2022, approximately 41% of housing units in Otsego County were built before 1939 (further 60% built before 1970).²⁰ Additionally, 64% of those housing units contain three or more bedrooms.²¹ These numbers reflect a housing stock consisting primarily of large, old housing units, which present numerous challenges related to taxes, energy consumption, environmental health, and maintenance costs, etc. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2021, the median age of a house in the U.S. was 43 years old, whereas in 1991 the median age was only 27.²² Compare this with Otsego County’s housing, which reported a median age of 66 in 2021.²³

Digital Landscape:

While computer access and digital equity have long been recognized as challenges across the Country’s urban and rural spaces, the COVID-19 pandemic (and ensuing quarantine) brought to light clear differences in computer ownership, proficiency, and online access. In this way, statistics regarding the presence of computers in households can serve as a proxy for socioeconomic status. There are four block groups within Otsego County in which more than 20% of the households *do not* have a computer.²⁴ This is significantly higher than that of Otsego County (9.77%), New York State (7.82%), and the United States (6.95%). While computer access is one indicator of potential digital inequity challenges, internet access (i.e., subscription service) can serve as another proxy for socioeconomic status, and can be seen in five block groups in which more than 14% of the households do not have an internet subscription, which is higher than the County (7.3%), State (6.06%), and the U.S. (6.59%).

¹⁹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2023-11-27/america-s-aging-housing-stock-takes-toll-on-public-health>
²⁰ U.S. Census Bureau 2022 5-Year ACS estimates
²¹ id.
²² <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2023-11-27/america-s-aging-housing-stock-takes-toll-on-public-health>
²³ 2021 American Community Survey. U.S. Census Bureau
²⁴ U.S. Census Bureau 2022 5-Year ACS estimates

A third component of the overall digital equity of a household can be whether a household is provided with broadband service. There are six block groups in which less than 68% of the households have a broadband subscription, compared to the County (82.49%), State (85.92%), and U.S. (86.25%).²⁵ Relative to the county, state, and federal rates, there are pockets of areas within Otsego County that could benefit from more widely offered broadband service.

Otsego County is faced with the challenge of improving access to computers, internet subscriptions, and broadband service. Connectivity to the advanced digital world of today is critical for county residents to stay informed, work from home, and conduct their daily lives.

Utilities and Facilities

Performing a housing needs assessment should also include gathering data regarding the facilities/utilities available across the housing stock. The lack of complete household plumbing can be indicative of particular housing needs, often serving as a proxy for socioeconomic status. Complete plumbing consists of hot and cold piped water, a bathtub or shower, and a flush toilet.²⁶ Approximately 0.7% (158) of households in Otsego County lack complete plumbing facilities (ACS 2021). However, there are two block groups located in the southeast corner of Otsego County (Maryland and Worcester), in which 11-15% of households lack complete plumbing facilities.

While the overwhelming majority of the County's households have complete kitchen facilities, there are 18 block groups in which at least 5% of households lack complete kitchen facilities. Complete kitchen facilities contain a stove or range, and a refrigerator.²⁷ A more concentrated need is in two of those 18 block groups where 9.73% (eastern Town of Unadilla) and 14.37% (southeastern Town of Otsego and northeastern Town of Hartwick) of homes lack complete kitchen facilities. These particular areas indicate a greater need for utilities ultimately related to increased risk of human health issues, such as malnutrition or poor diet.

In terms of home heating options, approximately 33.5% of occupied housing units use fuel oil or kerosene as the primary heating source. Utility gas and bottled/tank/LP gas are used in 20.5% and 16.5% of housing units, respectively.²⁸ Additionally, as of 2022, approximately 1.7% of housing units did not have telephone service available. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's ACS Survey from 2021, fuel use in Otsego County varies considerably between block groups. Five block groups contain at least 35% of households depending on wood as the primary fuel source. Approximately 53% of the County's households depend on utility gas and fuel oil/kerosene, compared to the state's 60% using utility gas, and federal use (47.49%).

²⁵ id.

²⁶ https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/working-papers/2015/acs/2015_Raglin_01.pdf

²⁷ https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/working-papers/2015/acs/2015_Raglin_01.pdf

²⁸ 2022 5-Year American Community Survey estimates. U.S. Census Bureau.

1.2.3 The Market

Potential homebuyers continue to face mounting challenges in their search for housing, with mortgage rates, inventory, and prices stifling their goals.²⁹ Mortgage rates reached their highest in approximately 20 years, while at the same time the market faced a significant reduction in the amount of available housing (new listings decreased by 15% statewide), both factors pushing sale prices ever higher.³⁰

Within Otsego County, the total number of closed sales (430) for 2023 was 28% lower than 2022. By comparison, closed sales statewide were down 20% during that same time period, supporting the notion that Otsego County has seen a uniquely significant loss compared to New York State. While the high mortgage rates and low inventory play a role in *reducing* sales, the median home sale price increased almost 34% from 2019 to 2023.³¹

When discussing housing in Otsego County, some portion of the conversation must include the challenge presented by short-term rentals. Short-term rentals, properties rented out for less than 90 consecutive days are common in communities with significant tourist attractions and Otsego County is no exception, especially with respect to youth baseball activities every summer and the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown.³² As of 2024 there were 867 short-term rental properties on Otsego County's Occupancy Tax roll. According to the Otsego County Treasurer's Department, there were 2,466 rooms rented by a total of 4,778 occupants in 2023. The short-term rentals provided a little over \$3 million in tax revenue to municipalities in Otsego County during 2023.

While the benefits of increased tax revenue for municipalities and the financial gains of individual property owners are apparent, a housing market with a significant short-term rental stock presents some challenges.³³ Recent research regarding the 'sharing economy' tells us that long-term housing suppliers (landlords) now find it much easier to transition their properties to the short-term market.³⁴ However, this shift in the form of housing supply from long-term to short-term can increase rents for long-term rentals and house prices, and decrease rents for short-term rentals. In research conducted for a 2019 Harvard Business Review article and working paper "the growth in home-sharing (via Airbnb) accounts for approximately 20% of the average annual increase in rents and roughly one-seventh of the average annual increase in housing prices."³⁵ So, while home-sharing platforms like Airbnb can and do have an impact on local rents and home prices, there are additional forces at play. In particular, whether an owner is absentee or occupies the rental themselves, can impact the rents/prices. If a landlord is an absentee owner they are more likely to shift their properties from long-term to short-term rentals,

²⁹ <http://www.nber.org/papers/w26573>

³⁰ 2023 Annual Report on the New York State Market. New York State Association of REALTORS, Inc.

³¹ *id.*

³² New York State Department of Taxation and Finance

³³ Barron, Kyle and Kung, Edward and Proserpio, Davide, The Effect of Home-Sharing on House Prices and Rents: Evidence from Airbnb (March 4, 2020). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3006832> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3006832>

³⁴ *id.*

³⁵ <https://hbr.org/2019/04/research-when-airbnb-listings-in-a-city-increase-so-do-rent-prices>

thereby having a more significant impact on rents/prices than an owner-occupier who may rent out particular spare space in their own long-term residence. In this sense, they are not fully converting their homes to short-term rentals.³⁶

Research continues to demonstrate that home-sharing platforms do affect local housing availability and affordability. In particular, absentee landlords shifting to short-term rentals (and away from long-term rental or sale) are reducing the housing supply, thus increasing the cost of living for local renters.³⁷

1.2.4 Permits for New Housing

During the period from 01/01/2020 to 12/31/2023 the Otsego County Code Enforcement Office issued 149 completions of either Certificates of Occupancy or Compliance regarding new residential single-family homes. Otsego County's Code Enforcement Office enforces building codes for 29 of the 34 municipalities in the County. These 29 municipalities represent 19,269 of the 29,838 housing units in Otsego County, as of the 2020 Census. Otsego County's housing stock increased overall by less than one percent (149 new homes). This does not include demolitions and the communities that independently issue building permits.³⁸ Otsego County's growth in housing stock meets the New York State Pro-Housing Community goal of one percent growth over the last three years. However, a county is not an eligible participant in the Pro-Housing program, so assessment of percentage growth in housing units for each individual municipality in Otsego County is important.

1.3. Socioeconomics of Housing Access

The University of Wisconsin Center for Health Disparities Research created an Area Deprivation Index mapping tool using publicly available data on income, education, employment, and housing quality to measure the communities facing the highest level of disadvantage, on a scale of 1 (least disadvantaged) to 10 (most disadvantaged). When ranked based on scores within New York State, all Census block groups in Otsego County are considered "disadvantaged", with most communities assigned a rank of 9 out of 10.³⁹

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines housing affordability as spending no more than 30% of household income on housing costs. Households spending more than 30% are considered cost-burdened.⁴⁰ According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2020 Decennial Census, the median household income of Otsego County was \$65,778. Communities with the lowest median income in the County are the hamlets of Schuyler Lake (\$35,809), South Edmeston (\$41,607), and the Village of Unadilla (\$42,917), whereas Richfield (\$48,939) reported the lowest median income among towns in Otsego County.⁴¹

³⁶ id.

³⁷ id.

³⁸ Otsego County Code Enforcement Data, 2024.

³⁹ <https://www.neighborhoodatlas.medicine.wisc.edu/mapping>

⁴⁰ <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/pdredge/pdr-edge-featd-article-081417.html>

⁴¹ 2020 U.S. Decennial Census

Table 6. Median Household Income for Otsego County and Municipalities with Lowest (2021):

Location:	Income:
Otsego County	\$65,778
Schuyler Lake	\$35,809
South Edmeston	\$41,607
Village of Unadilla	\$42,917
Town of Richfield	\$48,939

The U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS) estimated the median gross rent as a percentage of household income in Otsego County to be 26.6% in 2021.⁴² The municipalities with the highest percentages of income going towards rent are the Villages of Cherry Valley and Unadilla, as well as the hamlets of Schuyler Lake and Hartwick Seminary. In all four places, over 50% of household income goes towards rent. The town with the highest percentage of household income going towards rent is the Town of Maryland (42.7%). Other cost-burdened communities are Village of Milford, Town of Cherry Valley, Town of Decatur, Town of Maryland, Town of New Lisbon, Town of Oneonta, Town of Otego, Town of Plainfield, and Town of Westford.

Monthly costs continue to deepen the burden of homeowners and renters, alike. Approximately 50% of households in Otsego County are under a mortgage, compared with ~60% statewide and 62% nationally. There are five block groups in which more than 68% of households are paying a mortgage. More indicative of financial stress is the fact that 41%, 34%, and 45% of residents in three block groups (Town of Richfield, southern Town of Oneonta, and central City of Oneonta, respectively) contend with expending *over half* of their household income on monthly costs, in stark contrast to the county (10%), state (14%), and federal (11%) levels. These three block groups alone comprise 1,119 households.⁴³

When compared to the ACS 2022 estimate for household income, the following cost-burdened communities have monthly owner costs with mortgages that exceed 30%: Town of Decatur (34.1%), Town of Otego (31.6%), Town of Richfield (32.3%), Village of Cooperstown (30.2%), Hartwick Seminary (44.6%), Village of Laurens (36.7%), Mount Vision (31.2%), and the Village of Unadilla (30.6%).

⁴² Note that the ACS tends to have a wide margin of error

⁴³ 2020 U.S. Decennial Census

1.4 Housing Initiatives

This section documents the existing housing initiatives at the state and local levels.

1.4.1 New York State Initiatives

1.4.1.1 NYS Housing Dashboard

In 2023, along with a variety of other executive actions and initiatives regarding housing, Governor Hochul announced the launch of a new data dashboard for housing and zoning trends around the state. The dashboard provides data at the city, town, and village levels, and is designed to provide key information that can give the State and local municipalities a clearer idea of the housing needs in a given area.

1.4.1.2 Pro-Housing Communities

The Pro-Housing Communities program was created by Governor Hochul in 2023 and is administered by the New York State Office of Homes & Community Renewal (HCR). HCR describes the program as “an innovative policy designed to reward local governments that are working hard to address New York’s housing crisis.”⁴⁴

In order to become a Pro-Housing Community, a municipality must submit information about its zoning codes, including GIS data, as well as demonstrate housing growth with new permits totaling 0.33% in the last year, or 1% in the last three years. If the community cannot demonstrate housing growth, it can opt to pass a Pro-Housing Communities Resolution. Communities without zoning must work with HCR to determine how they can participate. As of April 2024, two communities in Otsego County have submitted letters of intent to become Pro-Housing Communities. These include the Village of Cooperstown and the Village of Richfield Springs. Other communities are working on achieving Pro-Housing Community status.

New York State’s FY 2025 budget includes Pro-Housing Community certification as a potential requirement to accessing grant funding from the State, including programs such as NY Forward and the Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI). This could create a barrier to community development funding for communities without zoning, access to GIS, or those with limited administrative capacity to compile the required documentation.

1.4.2 Local Housing Efforts

Otsego Rural Housing Assistance (ORHA)

ORHA is a Rural Preservation Company whose service area is the entirety of Otsego County. ORHA provides both rental assistance, through such programs as Section 8, and home rehabilitation and repair assistance, through a variety of different grant programs. In recent

⁴⁴ <https://hcr.ny.gov/phc>

years, these programs have included full home replacements, larger owner-occupied rehabilitation, more targeted home repair/modification assistance, and the development of new housing.

Mobile & Manufactured Home Replacement (MMHR)

ORHA has been the recipient of multiple MMHR grants from New York State. This program provides funding to fully replace deteriorated manufactured or mobile homes for low-income homeowners, at no cost to the homeowner. Since 2018, ORHA has completed 11 replacements of such homes and has funding for 2 additional projects in 2024. Nine of those projects were completed before 2023, when increasing construction costs and manufactured home prices began to outstrip the statutory per-site budget limits imposed by the MMHR program. ORHA secured additional funding for its current MMHR program, but future programs are threatened by the need for multiple funding sources.

Owner-Occupied Rehabilitation

The HOME Investments Partnership Program (HOME) is a federally funded program that funds many different forms of housing assistance. Funds are provided to states and certain localities, which often then grant them to non-profit organizations to provide assistance. ORHA was most recently a recipient of a \$250,000 HOME grant from HCR in 2021, for owner-occupied homeowner rehabilitation. Five households were assisted with this grant, with ORHA spending an average of \$29,000 at each property.

In 2020, the Town of New Lisbon, with ORHA acting as its subrecipient, received a \$198,000 Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) for owner-occupied home rehabilitation in the town. Eight projects throughout New Lisbon were completed, averaging \$23,032 in costs paid by CDBG funds and \$28,855 in total project costs. Projects included work like replacing severely deteriorated siding, lead paint remediation, roof replacement, foundation repair, electrical repairs or improvements, replacing aged and deteriorated windows or doors, and accessibility modifications.

ORHA has also regularly sought and been awarded funding from the Affordable Housing Corporation (AHC) to fund owner-occupied rehabilitation projects. While AHC funds can be used to fund a project alone, the Corporation strongly encourages using AHC funds to supplement other grant funding. Thus, ORHA often supplements projects funded by other grants (including HOME and CDBG) with AHC funding. In 2020, ORHA received a \$375,000 award from AHC, which funded projects in 23 homes from 2020 to 2022, 12 of which were also funded by another ORHA program. This includes three of the New Lisbon CDBG homes. AHC funds spent at these homes averaged \$16,304, with total project costs averaging \$25,437.

Targeted Assistance

ORHA has received a number of grants in recent years to provide assistance that is more targeted toward a specific population of homeowners. These grants often have somewhat lower per-site limits and are designed to address a specific need in a specific population.

In particular, ORHA has administered the Residential Emergency Services to Offer (Home) Repairs to the Elderly (RESTORE) program for a number of years throughout the county. RESTORE funds health and safety repairs and accessibility modifications to homes owned and occupied by income-qualified senior citizens (age 60 or older), with the aim of allowing seniors to age in place in their own homes. In 2022, ORHA received a \$100,000 RESTORE award, with which ORHA has assisted six households and is in the process of assisting a seventh. Projects thus far have averaged \$11,972 and include replacing a roof, bathroom accessibility modifications, correcting electrical hazards, and other health and safety repairs. ORHA was also awarded an additional \$250,000 in RESTORE funding in the 2024 funding cycle. ORHA plans to assist 25 households with this funding.

ORHA was also recently awarded an \$150,000 Access to Home grant, which funds accessibility modifications for low-income people with disabilities, both homeowners and renters. ORHA plans to assist 10 participants with this funding.

Rental Assistance

ORHA is the Local Program Administrator for the HCR Section 8 program in Otsego County. The Otsego County program is allotted 145 Housing Choice Vouchers (HCVs), which can be used by a participating family at any housing unit that meets minimum standards, and an additional 22 Project-Based Vouchers (PBVs), which are tied to 22 one-bedroom units in the Oneonta Heights senior building in Oneonta.

Demand for Section 8 assistance is high in the county, far outstripping the supply of vouchers, with waiting times for the HCV program extending to four to five years. As of late February 2024, the statewide Section 8 HCV program was at full funding utilization, and no new vouchers were being issued. In light of the waiting list length and the lack of available new vouchers, ORHA closed the HCV waiting list effective March 25, 2024.

New Housing

ORHA partnered with the Cherry Valley Community Facilities Corporation (CVCFC) to convert a wing of the former Cherry Valley school into 10 apartments for low-income senior citizens, Alden Park Apartments. The project began with a feasibility study and other planning in 2016 (supported by funding from New York Main Streets), construction itself began in early 2020, initial leasing took place in 2021, and Alden Park Apartments was officially placed in service in January of 2022. This program was primarily funded by a 2018 \$1.4 million award from New York State's Small Rental Development Initiative (SRDI), which provides funding specifically for new construction or rehabilitation of smaller rental projects (up to 20 units). Otsego County provided gap funding of \$25,000 in response to the increase in construction costs caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

CVCFC owns and manages Alden Park Apartments, with ORHA's assistance dealing with ongoing compliance monitoring and applicant/participant qualification requirements.

Otsego County Government

Since the 2019 housing study, the County Planning Department has completed a number of housing projects:

Housing Rehabilitation & COVID-19 Rental Assistance

In late 2018, the Planning Department allocated \$50,000 of Program Income from a Revolving Loan Fund Program developed from a 2004 New York State Small Cities CDBG award to a housing rehabilitation program for low-to-moderate income (LMI) households with an emphasis on assisting farmer in repairs to their owner-occupied homes, called "Farm Restore," as it was partially modeled on the state's RESTORE program. ORHA provided grant administrative services for this program, which ran in 2019. Six households received assistance through this program, averaging \$7,441 in Farm Restore funds per project. Two of these projects received additional funding from a RESTORE grant awarded to ORHA.

In 2019, the Planning Department, along with its subrecipient Otsego Rural Housing Assistance (ORHA), received a \$700,000 Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) to provide housing rehabilitation to low-to-moderate income (LMI) homeowners in Otsego County. Fourteen projects were completed throughout the county. Four of these projects received additional funding from other ORHA programs, primarily AHC.

In 2020, \$200,000 of the award was reprogrammed for a COVID-19 Rental Assistance Program. Households whose employment and income had been adversely affected by the pandemic were eligible for up to three months of rental assistance. Ultimately, 68 households received assistance.

County Agency Housing

The Otsego County Planning Department worked in partnership with the Otsego County Department of Social Services (DSS) and Otsego County Building Services Department to build six tiny homes and a community center for temporary emergency housing, including on-site solar and geothermal heating and cooling. This project was completed using Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding, CDBG Program Income, NYSERDA Clean Energy Communities Funding, and funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). The project was started in 2017 and faced a number of challenges related to the Pandemic, including funding, inflation, and supply chain issues. In 2022, the first six homes were completed at last.

These six homes were occupied starting in December of 2022 and continue to provide temporary housing to beneficiaries. There are concrete pads ready for the construction of four additional homes, but the high cost of construction has created challenges for finishing the additional plans for the project.

Temporary housing continues to be a need in Otsego County. The Southern Tier Homeless Coalition, Otsego County's regional Continuum of Care organization, conducts an annual Point in Time (PIT) Count of sheltered and unsheltered persons in the region. There were

approximately 76 unsheltered people from 68 households in Otsego County on January 26, 2023. There were 58 households being temporarily housed on that night.⁴⁵

Office for the Aging Initiatives

The Otsego County Office for the Aging (OFA) has in recent years partnered with ORHA to provide housing repair or modification assistance to low-income seniors in the county. In 2022 and 2023, this included a RESTORE-like initiative specifically for seniors who owned and occupied homes in mobile home parks, who had previously been unable to qualify for RESTORE due to their property ownership status. This program served 28 households for a total of \$151,291, averaging \$5,403 per project. While this program has been wound down due to OFA funding constraints, ORHA is now able to assist homeowners inside mobile home parks with their current RESTORE funding.

Municipal Plans & Projects

Municipalities can address housing goals in their Comprehensive Plans and Land Use Regulations. For example, the Town of Hartwick's plan outlines a general goal of higher density residential growth, aiming for community and sustainability. The plan mentions a specific goal of a proposed project to revitalize the hamlet, which would include increasing walkability and improving aesthetics of streetscapes. The Town of New Lisbon's plan contained a survey that showed 74.75% of residents at the time were concerned about the placement of mobile homes.

The Town of Richfield shares a plan with the Village of Richfield Springs. The plan listed three specific goals, which include: creating sustainable neighborhoods, developing housing that respects natural landscapes, and residential development in the commercial core. The Town of Richfield was recently awarded \$4.5 million for the NY Forward, which will enable the Town to work together with the Village of Richfield Springs to achieve community revitalization.⁴⁶

The Village of Cooperstown's plan lists specific recommendations such as: rehabilitating downtown buildings to enhance upper-floor residential uses, updating zoning regulations to diversify what types of housing are permitted in the village, and expressing the desire for a village-level housing needs assessment. They also aim to ensure that short-term rentals do not overrun residential options. The Village was awarded a NY Forward grant during the program's first round, which includes the \$4.5 million award for community revitalization.⁴⁷

The City of Oneonta's plan listed aging housing stock as an issue that remains critical. Responses to a survey showed that the thing most residents disliked the most about the City or thought needed the most improvement was the need for more non-student housing and year-round housing options. A stated goal said that the City Code language relating to short-term rentals should seek a balance of maximizing economic benefits for residents while minimizing

⁴⁵ https://ofoinc.org/application/files/3216/9841/3294/CNA_Board_Approved_2023.pdf

⁴⁶ <https://www.ny.gov/ny-forward/ny-forward-round-two-communities>

⁴⁷ <https://www.cooperstownny.org/new-york-forward-2/#:~:text=The%20NYF%20area%20includes%20the,and%20office%20complex%2C%20and%20parts>

negative impacts to neighborhoods. In a separate, much shorter comprehensive housing plan, an entire section is devoted to issues regarding rentals, the main two being the dominance of student housing (and that the old housing stock is unattractive to higher-income professionals), and the lack of affordable housing for low-income families. One recommendation is making a public registry of homeowners, specify if they are absentee landlords, and any code violations at a given property. Others include consistent oversight of student rentals, and creating incentives for landlords to sell more family housing/long-term rentals. The City has a number of recently completed, proposed, and on-going housing projects, many of which are related to its receipt of a \$10 million award through the NYS Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI).⁴⁸

1.5 Demographic Transitions in Population and Housing

Given recent demographic data provided by the U.S. Census Bureau, and assuming no direct effort at addressing demographics, Otsego County can expect to continue losing population and housing stock. Projecting population change is a complex endeavor, incorporating historic data while also acknowledging the numerous potential changes to the overall model over time. When assessing and attempting to project changes in population there are four key components to consider: (1) present or current population; (2) crude birth rate; (3) total fertility rate; and, (4) death rate. A complicating factor to consider in Otsego County is the significant portion of the population attending college and generally leaving the County before having children. The 2020 population of Otsego County was 58,524, along with a crude birth rate of 7.4, total fertility rate of 1.3, and a death rate of 10.7. As such, these data tell us that the projected population of Otsego County in 2030 will be 54,745 and in 2050 it will be approximately 47,902. This is a part of projected population decline throughout central New York.

2 Housing Need

Any assessment of housing needs should consider how best to define the term 'need'. This is often captured by using multiple variables as a proxy for need. Understanding the landscape of existing housing throughout a study area can provide baseline data critical to developing a reliable and useful assessment of housing needs. Taking inventory of the current housing stock, including the number of households/housing units, occupancy/vacancy rates, costs per month for the homeowner/renter, among others, can aid in identifying areas of need. Once particular housing needs are identified, it is imperative that an assessment understand the market forces at play in the study area. While the need may be apparent, the particular economic geography may not generate sufficient market interest with which to address the needs.

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2.1 Defining Needs

According to Hines, a global real estate developer and investment company, as well as U.S. Census Bureau and Moody's data, the U.S. is currently facing a housing shortage in the neighborhood of 3.2 million homes.⁴⁹ Particularly new residential construction has lagged, aside from high-end single-family housing which many cannot afford.⁵⁰

Low-income households face severe cost burdens, many occupants being forced to spend over half of their income on housing needs.⁵¹ Energy burden is a metric provided by the U.S. Department of Energy's Low-Income Energy Affordability Tool. However, this data is provided at the Census Tract scale, which provides us with less detail regarding any fine-scale spatial difference in burden distribution. Despite being provided at a scale different from much of the data discussed in this report, it is still valuable to see energy burden data reflected across the county. This data revealed the geographic distribution of energy burden, with a few key areas being particularly burdened. In particular, those block groups in the Towns of Unadilla and Maryland are considered the areas with the highest energy burden alongside the majority of the county being considered at a mid-level energy burden, while the Towns of Otsego and Middlefield are the 'least burdened'.

2.2 Visualizing Housing Needs

The hamlets of Schuyler Lake (\$35,809), South Edmeston (\$41,607), and the Village of Unadilla (\$42,917) reported the lowest median household incomes amongst hamlets. Among the towns, the lowest median household income was found in the Town of Richfield (\$48,939).⁵² The median household value for the Town of Richfield was \$172,800 in 2020. However, the median household values vary across places in the county, with Schenevus, Worcester, and East Worcester having the lowest in the eastern part of the county, while Unadilla (lowest overall) and Wells Bridge were the lowest along the I88 corridor. In the western side of the county, the Town of Pittsfield and the western half of Morris held some of the lowest median household values, while Richfield Springs had the lowest in the northern part of the county.

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines housing affordability as spending no more than 30% of income on housing costs. Households spending more than 30% are considered cost-burdened.⁵³ The median household income of Otsego County is \$65,778. The median household value for Otsego County in 2020 was \$154,200, compared to \$340,600 statewide and \$244,900 nationwide.

⁴⁹ <https://www.axios.com/2023/12/16/housing-market-why-homes-expensive-chart-inventory>

⁵⁰ <https://www.axios.com/2023/08/24/new-home-sales-july>

⁵¹ <https://www.nlihc.org/housing-needs-by-state/new-york>

⁵² US Census Bureau, 2020

⁵³ <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/pdredge/pdr-edge-featd-article-081417.html>

2.3 Availability and Affordability

Otsego County exhibits many demographic and socioeconomic challenges faced by many rural counties in the U.S. today: a declining population overall and a resident population aging-in-place as young people leave for populous and economically diverse regions.

Amongst the towns in Otsego County, there are consistently impoverished areas that continue to struggle with lower incomes and increasing home values. Poverty rates by block group were very high (20-39%) in the Village of Richfield Springs (north side) and the City of Oneonta. Other pockets of relatively elevated poverty rates (13-19%) were found in eastern Hartwick, eastern Unadilla, eastern Otego, and the Town of Oneonta's 'southside', Pittsfield, and Richfield, among others. The relationship between poverty and housing need has long been established, however, the response to such a challenge is amplified when a community sees its overall housing stock diminish over time. The total number of housing units in the majority of Otsego County's towns has dropped, in some cases rather significantly, between 2010 and 2020. More specifically, the Towns of Springfield and Burlington experienced an 8.3% loss of housing units while the Town of Maryland lost 9% and the Town of Decatur saw a decrease in total housing units of 14.5%. The City of Oneonta was one of only four municipalities that experienced a growth in the number of housing units from 2010 to 2020.

In order to capture the spatial variation of various socioeconomic and demographic data across the County, data was assessed at multiple scales including towns, places, and block groups. The block groups with the lowest percent occupancy rates are confined to the north central and north east portions of the county, in particular, Richfield, Exeter, eastern Hartwick, Eastern Otsego, northern Middlefield, Roseboom, and Decatur. These all fell within the range of 57-66% occupancy (2020). However, the highest household vacancy rates in 2020 were within Richfield, Exeter, eastern Hartwick, Eastern Otsego, northern Middlefield, Roseboom, and Decatur. These all had household vacancy rates of at least 34%.⁵⁴

3 Priorities

Priorities were determined by comparing Otsego County's housing needs to state and national trends, benchmarks, and planning principles. The following priorities recognize the County's limited local capacity, and promote efforts to support communities and enlist strategic partnerships to improve housing in the County.

3.1. Support Municipal Efforts to Address Housing Needs

Many of Otsego County's local governments are limited in their capacity to address housing needs in their communities. Limitations often stem from lack of volunteer staff, available time, and expertise with which to develop and administer many projects. These communities need additional information and technical support to update their broad array of efforts to address

⁵⁴ 2020 Decennial Census. U.S. Census Bureau.

housing issues. Otsego County's Planning Department recognizes the challenges faced by local governments and as a result, plans to develop more interactive services by which communities can gain the resources needed to pursue funding sources that may otherwise be unattainable. Otsego County Planning can provide the technical expertise and detailed information needed to help these communities pursue their goals, be they the development of a Comprehensive Plan, effective crafting of Land Use Regulations to better address housing, the alignment of efforts with broader initiatives (i.e. Pro-Housing Communities, Smart Growth), or the initial identification and vetting of projects most suitable for funding.

3.2 Apply Current Planning Principles to the Prioritization of Housing-related Projects

In order to promote the strategic development of communities and their housing stock there must be guideposts in the form of principles and policies. These guiding principles must inform both policy and action in a way that leads us towards the goal of a more robust and resilient housing stock. Such principles will provide a methodology by which we can prioritize housing-related projects. Projects that align with planning concepts like Smart Growth should rank high on the prioritization list. Smart Growth encourages the support and development of a diverse housing stock. In particular, this should include a wide range of housing types such as single and multi-family housing. Infill development of existing population concentrations (cities, villages, and hamlets) should be encouraged in order to preserve farmland and open space. Projects that include varied and efficient housing options while also improving the infrastructure for the broader community should also be strongly encouraged.

3.3 Use Strategic Partnerships to Address Housing Needs

Identified projects should leverage strategic partnerships in order to increase capacity. Municipal governments can work together on housing and community development projects or enlist local non-profit agencies as project partners. For example, projects that will benefit seniors should involve agencies that serve Otsego's aging population in addition to involving housing-related agencies.

3.4 Apply for Funding to Address Housing Needs in Otsego County

Rising costs of housing and infrastructure present a challenge for our resource-limited communities. Funding is available periodically to assist communities with planning activities and implementation of housing projects. Using strategic partnerships, Otsego County and its communities should apply for funding to address housing needs. Combining funding sources through capital stacking, when allowed, should be encouraged in order to address multiple aspects of a project (water/wastewater, housing, energy, etc.).

More Information

See our Housing Needs Assessment [Story Map](#)

If you have any questions, please reach out to either agency using the contact information below.

Otsego County Planning Department

planning@otsegocountyny.gov

607-547-4225

Otsego Rural Housing Assistance, Inc.

orha@otsegoruralhousingassistance.org

607-286-7244