

The Saratoga Springs Greenbelt: **How it got created and what regulates it?**

The Origin of the Greenbelt Policy:

The idea that Saratoga Springs was a “City in the Country” was informally started in the late 1980s. It was used as a political slogan for several local candidates.

The first formal adoption of a governmental policy expressing the Greenbelt was established in the City’s 2001 Comprehensive Plan:

“This Plan is based on the “City-in-the-Country” concept, meaning a city with an intensively developed urban core and an economically vibrant central business district, with well-defined urban edges and an outlying area of open lands, a landscape of rural character and low-density residential development.” (Page 3)

The Greenbelt was restated as the major theme of the 2015 Comprehensive Plan:

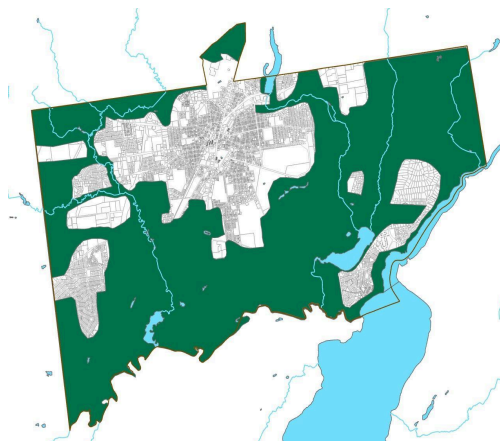
“This Comprehensive Plan is a unified set of policies that will guide the future development of the City of Saratoga Springs. The Plan consists of nearly 250 recommended actions and a Future Land Use map that indicates the desired location, uses, and intensity of development.” (Executive Summary – page iv)

“This Plan sets forth the following vision for the community:

Saratoga Springs is the “City in the Country.” This concept reflects a city with an intensively developed urban core and an economically vibrant central business district, with well-defined urban edges and an outlying area of rural character, comprised of agriculture, open lands, natural and diverse environmental resources, and low-density development.” (Page iv) (Emphasis added)

The 2015 Plan maps the Country part of the “City in the Country” theme.

- “The balance between the “city” and the “country” is fundamental to the general health, welfare and economic viability of the community. This has been reiterated by the community time and time again. Therefore, this plan sets out to reinforce the “country” within the City’s jurisdiction through a Country Overlay Map. Since the



development of the towns surrounding Saratoga Springs is indeed beyond the City's control, the City must take proactive measures to preserve the greenbelt surrounding the urban core." (Page 60) (Emphasis added)

The 2015 Plan states that the Country Overlay Area is the City Greenbelt.

- "The Country Overlay Area depicts a desired "greenbelt" around the urban core which defines and shapes the "Country" in the "City in the Country" vision of this comprehensive plan." (Page 61) (Emphasis added)

The Country Overlay Area does not define uses but establishes "Country" Character:

- "The Country Overlay Map is also intended to provide support for existing overlay design requirements such as the City's Gateway Overlay districts, which protect the character of the City's important gateways." (Page 61) (Emphasis added) *(Note: The City's Gateway Overlay districts were deleted in the 2022 UDO.)*
- The Country Overlay Area does NOT specify the desired location, uses and intensity of development. Those are specified in the Plan's Future Land Use Map.
- "The intent of this section is not to prohibit or permit any land use activity but instead is to reaffirm that open space values be taken into consideration in development proposals within the Country Overlay Area or in adopting any zoning amendments for areas included in the Country Overlay Area." (Page 61)

Why the Greenbelt is Important:

The 2015 Comprehensive Plan clearly laid out three broad areas of benefits provided by the Greenbelt that justified a "Legitimate Public Interest in Protecting the Greenbelt." (pp. 62-63)

1. Environmental benefits: Natural features are valuable as part of a community's character, scenery, and wildlife habitat, as well as the area's quality of life. The ecological integrity of the City's natural resources, including groundwater, streams and wetlands, trees and woodlands, steep slopes, vegetated wildlife habitat, and areas rich in biodiversity must be maintained and protected, even as development occurs. The ecosystem services provided in the greenbelt include water and air purification, stormwater runoff management, maintaining hydrological cycles, crop pollination, and nutrient dispersal and cycling. Actions

to minimize impacts to these functions should be put in place to protect the City's natural resources. The City's legitimate interest in these natural resources has been well documented in the 2001 Open Space Plan and the Saratoga County Green Infrastructure Plan. With conservation as the core development principle in this area, the community is assured that development in this area works alongside conservation values.

2. Economic benefits and unique community character: Natural features are valuable as part of a community's character, scenery as well as the area's quality of life. The city has a long history as a destination for tourism, attracted by spring waters, Victorian architecture, amenities of a compact downtown and the natural beauty of the surrounding landscape and water bodies. The greenbelt is a significant contributor to the City's tourism economy by providing scenic viewsheds and recreational opportunities. The greenbelt also continues to reinforce the traditional human development pattern that preserves the unique "City in the Country" character of the community. The low intensity development that has occurred in the conservation development district supports the character of the community as a whole. Conservation-based development can generate a reasonable return on investment for developers in this area. In addition, conservation-based development provides citizens with access to open space which encourages healthy lifestyles.

3. Climate change mitigation and adaptation: The greenbelt plays an important function in mitigating the adverse impacts of climate change, including carbon sequestration. The lands in the greenbelt area absorb and retain water, protecting against flooding, which is projected to increase due to more intense and more frequent storms resulting from a warming atmosphere. Open lands and wetlands in the greenbelt also serve to naturally treat and infiltrate stormwater runoff before it enters groundwater or surface water bodies.

Key Policy Statements call for Rural Character in the Greenbelt:

Several other policies from the 2015 Comprehensive Plan call for low intensity rural character in areas around the city core.

Community form, design and quality: (Page 48)

3.4-1 Maintain and promote the "City in the Country" form that includes an intensively developed urban core, an economically vibrant central business district, and residential neighborhoods with well- defined urban edges and an outlying area of rural character, comprised of agriculture, open lands, natural and

diverse environmental resources, and low-density residential development.
(Emphasis added)

3.4-2 Maintain the greenbelt by restricting incompatible uses and the intensity of development. (Emphasis added)

3.4-3 Continue to prohibit the establishment of Planned Unit Developments (PUDs) in the Conservation Development District of the City.

3.4-5 Discourage destination type resorts that compete with the downtown core.

3.4-6 Identify priority gateways into the City, such as Route 50 and South Broadway, and develop/review guidelines for appropriate area-specific amenities and treatments.

The city's zoning ordinance (UDO) does contain some design standards that are intended to implement for "rural character" policy for uses within the Greenbelt. These include:

Architectural Review:

Article 7.4 of the UDO creates an Architectural Review District. Within the Greenbelt, all activities that require a building or demolition permit are subject to review by the Design Review Board if the activity lies on properties that front on Route 29 (Lake Avenue), Union Avenue, Route 9 (South Broadway), Route 50 (Ballston Avenue), Route 29 (Washington Avenue) and Route 9N (Church Street).

While the Comprehensive Plan calls for the Greenbelt to have "rural character" there are currently no specific rural criteria or design standard in the architectural review ordinance. There also are no graphic illustrations of any design standards or guidelines. The Design Review Board is only required to ensure that new development is "compatible" with the surrounding existing development. All too frequently that existing development does not have "rural character".

Conservation Subdivision:

Article 16 of the UDO requires that all site plan and subdivision approvals in the RR and SR zoning districts within the Greenbelt be subject to a conservation analysis that preserves constrained land and cluster development to create additional open space.

Article 16.9 and 16.10 contain lot arrangements and design standards that seek to achieve rural character for all new development. However, there are no graphic illustrations of these rural design standards or guidelines.

Gateway Commercial -Rural Zoning District:

Article 4.6 of the UDO contains some design standards for development within the Gateway Commercial-Rural (GC-R) zoning districts that lie along Ballston Avenue and South Broadway within the Greenbelt. These replaced more detailed and graphically illustrated rural gateway design standards that were in the zoning ordinance since 2001. The new GC-R design standards are rather vague and will not illustrate.

Policies on Uses allowed in the Greenbelt:

The 2015 Plan sets forth a development vision for all geographic areas of the city. Each land use category is described and mapped.

“The Map sets the direction for future land uses within the City. It illustrates the City’s vision by identifying broad categories of land use. The Map is not a zoning map. However, the zoning map must follow the direction set forth in the Comprehensive Plan in accordance with General City Law §28-a. The zoning ordinance is typically the regulatory document that addresses densities, area, bulk, and specific permitted uses.” (Page 55) (Emphasis added)

“The land use categories are general guides to future zoning or other regulations. State law mandates that zoning must be in conformance with the policies of the Comprehensive Plan. This means that the density within the zoning for a particular area must be equal or less than that which is described within this document. When areas are to be rezoned, the uses and densities permitted within the zoning district must be compatible with the ranges presented in the land use category. (Page 55) (Emphasis added)

Key “Future Land Use Categories” of the Plan that comprise most the “greenbelt”.

“The following descriptions are offered for the proposed land use category designations. The descriptions are intended to include the purpose or intent of the category, an overview of general uses and a description of the character for each land use category.” (Page 56)

“Conservation Development District (CDD)

The Conservation Development District designation reflects the “Country” of the City in the Country. This designation allows for low density residential, outdoor recreation, agricultural, and other rural uses utilizing land conservation methods

such as clustering. Areas typically include single-family lots and subdivisions, existing planned developments, farms, estates, and natural areas. Commercial activities should be limited to those that support rural and recreational uses and which protect valuable open space, protect natural resources and maintain natural systems. This designation reflects a rural or agrarian character that works to preserve contiguous open spaces, protect natural resources and restore and maintain natural systems, which will all become increasingly important and valuable community resources.” (Page 58) (Emphasis added)

“Specialty Mixed Use - Gateway (SG)

The Specialty Mixed Use - Gateway designation allows for a variety of low to moderate intensity uses that focus on maintaining a distinctive entrance to the City. The goal for the commercial gateways is not to foster more intense or dense land use development, but rather to improve the physical appearance and attractiveness of the commercial uses. These uses are primarily commercial in nature and are complementary to the Downtown Core and Complementary Core. This designation is characterized largely by automobile access yet with aesthetically pleasing buildings and landscaping along the street with parking in the rear.” (Page 60) (Emphasis added)

Uses Permitted in the Greenbelt by the Zoning:

Some development is permitted with the Greenbelt. Such development is regulated by the zoning. The following UDO Zoning Districts lie within the Greenbelt:

- All of Rural Residential (RR) [Single family homes on 2 acre lots that are required to be clustered to allow 50% of the developable land to be conserved as open space.]
- All of the Water Related Business (WRB) [Includes the marina and restaurants near the Fish Creek Bridge]
- Most of the Flood Plain Overlay District and Water Protection Overlay District (WP) [Wet areas such as water supply reservoir, wetlands, floodplains, streams and their buffer areas that are protected from development]
- Most of Gateway Commercial – Rural (GC-R) [Corridors along outer Ballston Ave and middle & lower South Broadway]
- Most of Institutional – Parks/Recreation (INST-PR) [Includes Spa State Park and city recreational area and trails]
- Small portion of Suburban Residential (SR) (Single family homes on 1/2 acre lots that are required to be clustered to allow 35% of the developable land to be

conserved as open space) that borders Saratoga Lake and the Oak Ridge clustered development

- Small portion of Urban Residential – 2 (UR-2) that includes the vacant land off of Hutchins Road and a residential development off of White Farms Road
- Small portion of Institutional – Educational (INST-ED) [Yaddo and Skidmore College North Woods]
- Small portion of Institutional – Horse Track Related (INST-HTR) [Includes the privately owner former Whitney Farm on Nelson Avenue]
- Small portion of Institutional -Municipal Purpose (INST-MP) [Includes the former Weibel Avenue Landfill]
- Small portions of PUD that border Saratoga Lake [Water's Edge PUD, Interlaken PUD, Green Acres PUD]
- Small portions of Urban Residential-1 (UR-1) that lies along the Northway
- Small portion of Neighborhood Center (NC) that lies along the Northway