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### Patterns of Government in Onondaga County: Structure and Services of County, City, Town, and Village Governments (2024)

FOCUS Greater Syracuse

Syracuse University, Maxwell School, Community Benchmarks Program

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# Patterns of Government in Onondaga County

Structure and Services of County, City, Town, and Village Governments



A Report by FOCUS Greater Syracuse and the Community Benchmarks program of the Maxwell School of Syracuse University



# FOCUS

GREATER SYRACUSE



# PREFACE

This 2024 revised *Patterns of Government* is an important resource for elected and public officials, citizens, students, businesses, nonprofit organizations, educational institutions, and the general public. *Patterns of Government* also serves as the text for the Citizens Academy program, produced by FOCUS Greater Syracuse, Inc. Local government courses at Maxwell School of Syracuse University and Newhouse School of Public Communications also use *Patterns of Government* as an educational tool. This text contains vital information that ordinarily can be found only when one researches multiple sources.

This information will help you understand how local governments are organized, the services they provide, and sources of funding. You will become aware of how tax dollars are used, the function and interaction of programs, and who to contact for service and information. If the material in this text motivates civic trusteeship and mutual responsibility with governments, it has achieved its purpose.

Care has been given to updating select chapters in 2024 by Trisha Balani and Tyler Branigan, Maxwell School Policy Studies students. These updates were supervised by Rich Barton, PhD, an assistant teaching professor at Maxwell, Rita L. Reicher, PhD, acting executive director, and Alicia Ernest, Program Director, of FOCUS Greater Syracuse, Inc. In 2021, Karina Freeland and Nicholas Piro, both alumni of the Maxwell School, updated the select chapters, which was supervised by Austin Zwick, PhD, a faculty member at the Maxwell School and at FOCUS Greater Syracuse, Inc. by Rita L. Reicher, PhD, acting executive director, Jessica Lisi, and Dee Klees. Updates in 2018 were provided by Jack Schlosser and Samantha Trombley, students in the Maxwell School, and for 2015 by Mathew Mazer, a Policy Studies student at the Maxwell School. These updates were supervised and guided by William Coplin and Carol Dwyer, director of the Community Benchmarks Program (CBP), also at the Maxwell School; and Charlotte (Chuckie) Holstein, executive director emeritus, and Dee Klees at FOCUS Greater Syracuse, Inc. The graphic design was created by Yu Ling, graduate student of the Newhouse School of Public Communications. Some design aspects have been updated in accordance with the branding guidelines adopted by FOCUS Greater Syracuse, Inc. We express a hearty thank you for the excellence with which they completed their task.

A warm thank you to all the government and community officials who provided the most current information. Their valuable contributions make this edition an important source of information.

The original *Patterns of Government* was published by the League of Women Voters of the Syracuse Metropolitan Area in 1970 and revised in 1981, 1996, 2006, 2012, 2015, 2018, and 2021. Since 2012, subsequent updates have been made by the CBP and posted on the FOCUS website: [www.focussyracuse.org](http://www.focussyracuse.org).

The 2024 edition of *Patterns of Government* is sponsored by FOCUS Greater Syracuse, Inc. and the Community Benchmarks Program of the Maxwell School of Syracuse University.

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# 1- STRUCTURE

## INTRODUCTION

Long before the European settlements in Jamestown and Plymouth, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (also known as the Iroquois Confederacy) was formed in Central New York. It was a league of five tribes: Mohawk, Seneca, Oneida, Cayuga, and Onondaga, joined later by the Tuscarora to become the six nations. This traditional Native American form of government believed by some to be the first fundamental democracy in the Western Hemisphere, has survived for centuries and still exists inside the borders of Onondaga County on the sovereign Onondaga Nation Territory. The English form of colonial government was introduced to Central New York when the first settlers of European heritage arrived, enticed by the area's good farmland, strategic location at the crossroads of pioneer trade routes, and especially by the presence of salt springs.

The first Caucasian settlers traveled by way of the Hudson and Mohawk River valleys. That historic route still provides important canal, railroad, and highway transportation in the state. Salt deposits made the Central New York area a center for early commerce, and this natural resource furnished the financial resources for the early industries of the new settlers. Fertile soil and a plentiful supply of water supported an agricultural economy, while commerce and industry developed along the canals and railroads. Today, Interstate Highways 90 and 81 intersect the metropolitan area that extends to the five counties of the central New York region.

The city of Syracuse and the towns and villages surrounding it make up Onondaga County at the heart of Central New York. In the north of the county where the land is low and level, agriculture in the last 50 years has given way to industrial and residential development. In the southern area the hilly countryside is still predominantly agricultural but is slowly becoming more developed as people move out of the city into the suburbs.

Although residential and commercial development seems to spread without regard to political boundaries, the metropolitan area is defined as the city and the communities around it, which draw much of their livelihood from the city and use many city services. This publication attempts to describe not only the traditional institutions of government in Onondaga County with its towns, villages, and the City of Syracuse, but also the extent of metropolitan growth and its effect upon these institutions. The Syracuse area has unique features and many advantages, as this text will detail. Like many urban areas in the Northeast United States, Syracuse has had an aging and low-income center city, declining population, and a property tax base inadequate to pay for the services needed by its citizenry. This is compounded by the sprawl of the expanding suburbs which can accelerate the deterioration of natural resources and add to the financial burdens of all governments with increased infrastructure needs in the suburbs and a loss of tax base in the city.

In response to these problems the various local governments have added departments and services to the structures inherited from colonial times. More recently they have been exploring opportunities for shared services along with transferring some of their traditional responsibilities among the various levels of government. Added to this mix is an influx of federal monies in the form of general revenue sharing and grants for specific projects. The money helps alleviate some of the problems, but new ones arise. Many of the more recent problems can exceed the capacity of a single agency at any level of government.

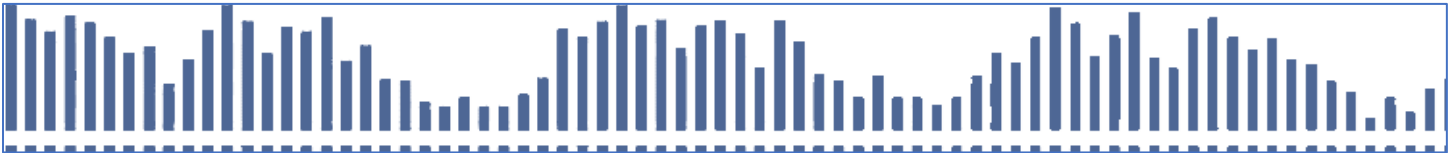
This report attempts to identify the responsibilities at each of the levels of local government — county, city, town, and village — and to provide a framework for understanding how each relates to the other.

# HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT CHAPTER ONE

*Hanover Square has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1976.*



Counties and towns are often described as involuntary forms of government; that is, they were established originally by New York State to administer basic state functions within geographical divisions. These divisions are similar to the townships and parishes found in some other states. Cities and villages in contrast, are described as voluntary; that is, they were created by the state at the request of their residents.



## Formation of the County

The first permanent European settlements in what is now Onondaga County were founded in the mid-1780s.<sup>2</sup> Under frontier conditions, distances were great, population was sparse, and transportation and communication were difficult and slow. An initial priority to both state and settler was the prompt and orderly administration of justice and property rights. Following the English colonial example, New York State divided its territory into counties in order to provide units of court jurisdiction. Each county had a seat where circuit court sessions were held.

The first Onondaga County officers were mainly those who served the Circuit Court and jail. The first sessions of the court met in local taverns. By 1810 the county seat was officially established in Onondaga Hill and a courthouse was constructed. It was not long before the villages of Syracuse and Salina were competing for the designation as the county seat. It was decided to relocate the county seat between the villages of Syracuse and Salina, and Onondaga Hill's influence waned.

The area of Onondaga County was originally about four times larger than it is today. The difficulties that settlers faced in traveling to the county seat and population growth were major factors in the subdivision of the geographical area. From the original county territory established in 1794, the state created Cayuga County in 1799, Cortland County in 1808, and Oswego County in 1816.



New York State also followed the colonial example of establishing towns as taxing units. The original boundaries of Onondaga County were initially divided into 11 towns. As the county's smaller boundaries exist today, all its towns are mainly subdivisions of four of the original towns. The smaller geographic unit of the town was determined to be more convenient for serving a number of functions.

## Formation of the Town

One of the primary functions of a town was to provide tax revenues to support county courts. Administration of the taxing process was assigned to the supervisor who, because of the nature of the duties, was also the town's chief executive officer.

Supervisors of all the towns in the county were required to meet annually and, when authorized by the state, to undertake public projects with the costs shared by the towns. Among the first activities of Onondaga County's Board of Supervisors was construction of the courthouse in Onondaga Hill.



The Fourth County Courthouse (c.2009)

In 1910 counties began to organize county highway departments to share road building responsibility with the state and towns. Today, towns maintain roads, but usually do not build them.

The towns also supervised much of the early road construction. For example, the town of Manlius had seven road districts in the early years which became 30 by 1807 and 70 by mid-century. The great bulk of the roads during this period were local or town roads, although at the same time state roads were being built east and west.

Towns were required to see to the needs of the poor through the office of Overseer of the Poor. The determination of the need was left to the locality. Welfare was sometimes taken care of by a public auction at which the town contracted with the bidder who offered to support the poor at the lowest cost to the town. Later the state authorized counties to build poor houses. The first building for the Onondaga County Poorhouse was erected in 1827. A century later, in 1938, the responsibility for public welfare was assigned to the county, and the Department of Social Services was established.

Funds for state highways appropriated by the state legislature were paid to those towns commissioned to build and maintain them. By the middle of the 19th century the main responsibility for road construction and maintenance passed to private turnpike companies and builders of plank roads. Also at this time, canals and railroads carried most of the traffic. The Erie Canal was completed in 1825, and railroads were in place in the 1830s. It was not until the early 20th century that the roads again became an important function of local government.

Responsibilities for county government slowly increased. For example, a series of public works projects in the early 1930s developed Highland Forest and Onondaga Lake Park and helped establish a county parks system. Post-World War II growth accelerated the work of county government, which was still administered by the County Board of Supervisors, a system established in the late 18th century. The need for a strong executive branch was recognized and a major reorganization of county government was approved by voters in 1961.

Public education was closely linked to towns at first. State policy mandated that as land was divided for settlement, lots should be set aside for schools. In 1812 state law required that each town divide its territory into school districts and provide a school for each district. Elected commissioners were responsible for the schools. Early school districts were numerous and small. For example, in 1842 the town of Manlius had 22 districts; Clay, 20; Skaneateles, 18; and Camillus, 14. During the early 20th century the state urged school districts to consolidate. This consolidation resulted in 18 school districts that currently exist in Onondaga County. Today, all districts, except in the city of Syracuse, operate independently of the municipal governments.

## Formation of City and Villages

Counties and towns were designed to assist the state in providing basic government services throughout its territory; the purpose of cities and villages is to enable people in areas of dense population to provide for their special 'urban' needs, such as fire protection, water supply, street and sidewalk maintenance – and toward the end of the century – electric street lighting.

Nine villages in Onondaga County were incorporated by special state action between 1830 and 1852. Since 1874 villages have been incorporated by the New York State Legislature. Six of the current villages in Onondaga County were incorporated by general law after 1874. Unlike villages, cities have always been incorporated by special action of the New York State Legislature.

Although a city charter is more difficult to obtain, a city has more local control than a village. For this reason, some settlements preferred to seek city charters. Syracuse, the only city in the county, received its charter in 1848, following a public referendum resulting in the villages of Syracuse and Salina to merge.

## Growth of Villages

Because population centers grew to serve an agricultural economy, early villages were located near the sources of power needed to run the saw and grist mills: Manlius and Fayetteville on Limestone Creek; Marcellus and Camillus on Nine Mile Creek; Skaneateles, Elbridge, and Jordan on Skaneateles Creek.

Their vitality as centers fluctuated with the growth and development of transportation in the state. In the days of stagecoaches, the great turnpikes that crossed the state brought prosperity to villages like Camillus, Elbridge, Fabius, Manlius, Marcellus, and Tully. The Erie and Oswego canals, while generally having a beneficial effect in the county, tended to strengthen the settlements they touched at the expense of the others. Manlius, an early trade center, was hurt when the Erie Canal shifted the flow of commercial traffic to the north. Likewise, Jordan's fortune rose while Elbridge's declined. The era of the railroads, which began in the first third of the 19th century, caused further fluctuations. A major impact on the region occurred in the 1950s with construction of the two major highway systems, Interstate 81 north and south, and the New York State Thruway east and west.

## Growth of Syracuse

From the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 until the Second World War, growth of Onondaga County was measured by the growth of Syracuse, first as a village and then as a city.

Several factors contributed to the rise of Syracuse. The rich deposit of salt, which underlies much of Central New York, provided the source of the earliest industry supporting the villages of Liverpool, Salina, and Syracuse. By the middle of the 19th century, the salt trade was joined by other industries such as pottery and candle making. The Erie Canal was crucial to the development of Syracuse as a major commercial center. Railroads further sustained its growth.

Between 1850 and 1920, the county population outside the city grew from 57,000 to 64,000. During that same time, the city's population grew from 22,000 to 172,000. Growth of the city was accomplished in large measure by a series of annexations. As the population increased and spilled over the city line forming 'suburban' communities, the city responded by enlarging its jurisdiction to include these communities, many of which were incorporated villages.

The annexed communities lost independence but gained services that they could not easily supply themselves. For example, the city had established the Skaneateles water supply and distribution system and installed some sewers before 1900 benefitting the annexed villages of Danforth and Eastwood. Annexation also brought bordering communities into the city school system and gained for them the services of professional fire departments. The policy of annexation helped to insure the political jurisdiction responsible for providing services to the community also had full access to the community's taxable wealth.

## Today's Trend

Data from the US Census Bureau show that Onondaga County's population declined during the 1990s from 468,973 in 1990 to 458,336 in 2000. However, Onondaga County's population had recovered to 467,464 by the 2010 Census, and an estimated 468,463 by 2015.

While the population of Onondaga County in the 1990s decreased by about 2.2 percent, the Syracuse population dropped by 10 percent over the same time period. Syracuse's population decline slowed over the next decade to a 1.5 percent drop between 2000 and 2010.

It is the decline of annexation and the growth of special benefit districts that have influenced this kind of population distribution. Special benefit districts provide the services cities and villages usually offer to housing developments that are outside city and village limits. Recent economic forces have forced local communities to consolidate services and governments to control costs and lower taxes. Community leaders have confronted the issue of sprawl by encouraging citizens to live in or nearer to the central city.

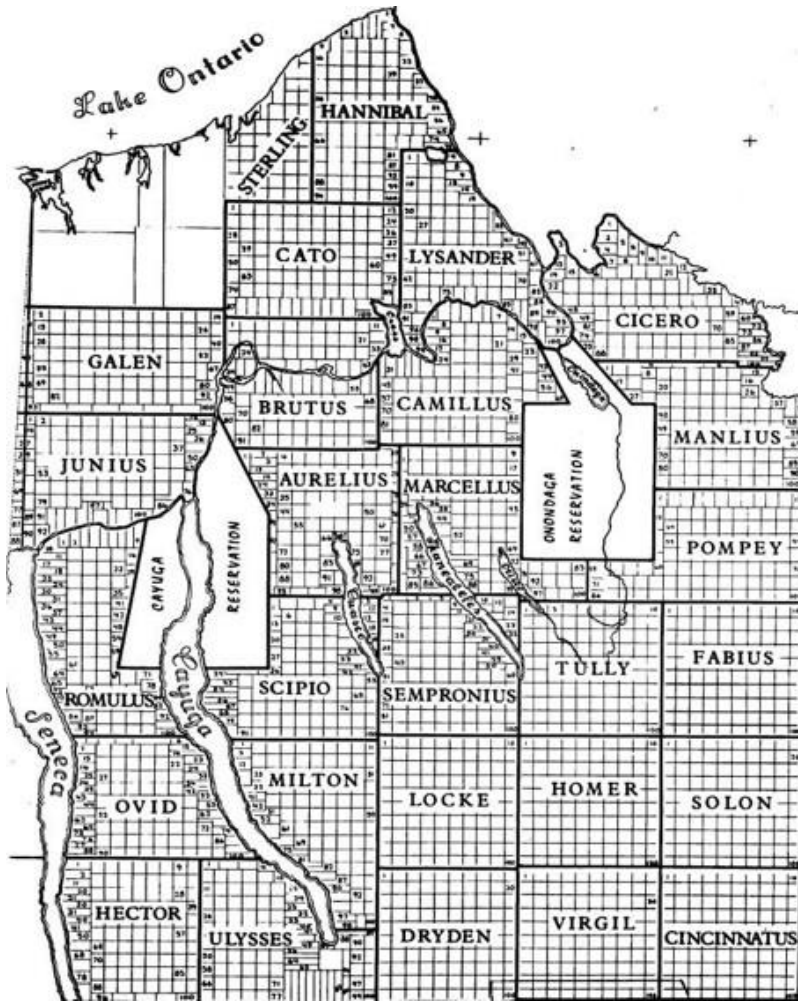
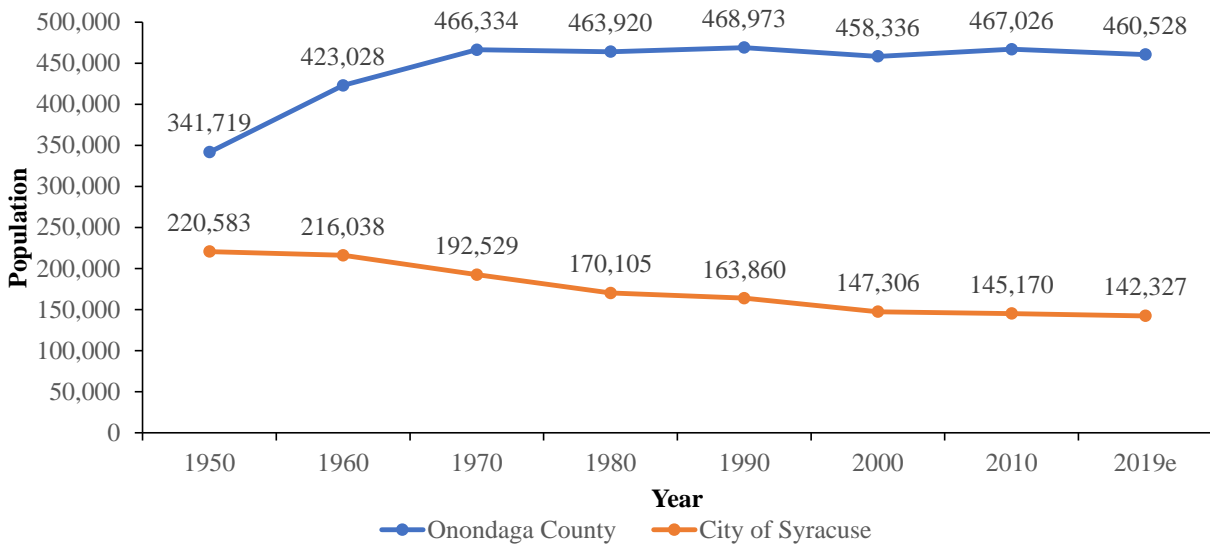


Figure 1.1: Military tract, 1792 by Simeon Dewitt, Surveyor General of the State of New York  
Source: Map courtesy of the Onondaga Historical Association

Figure 1.2

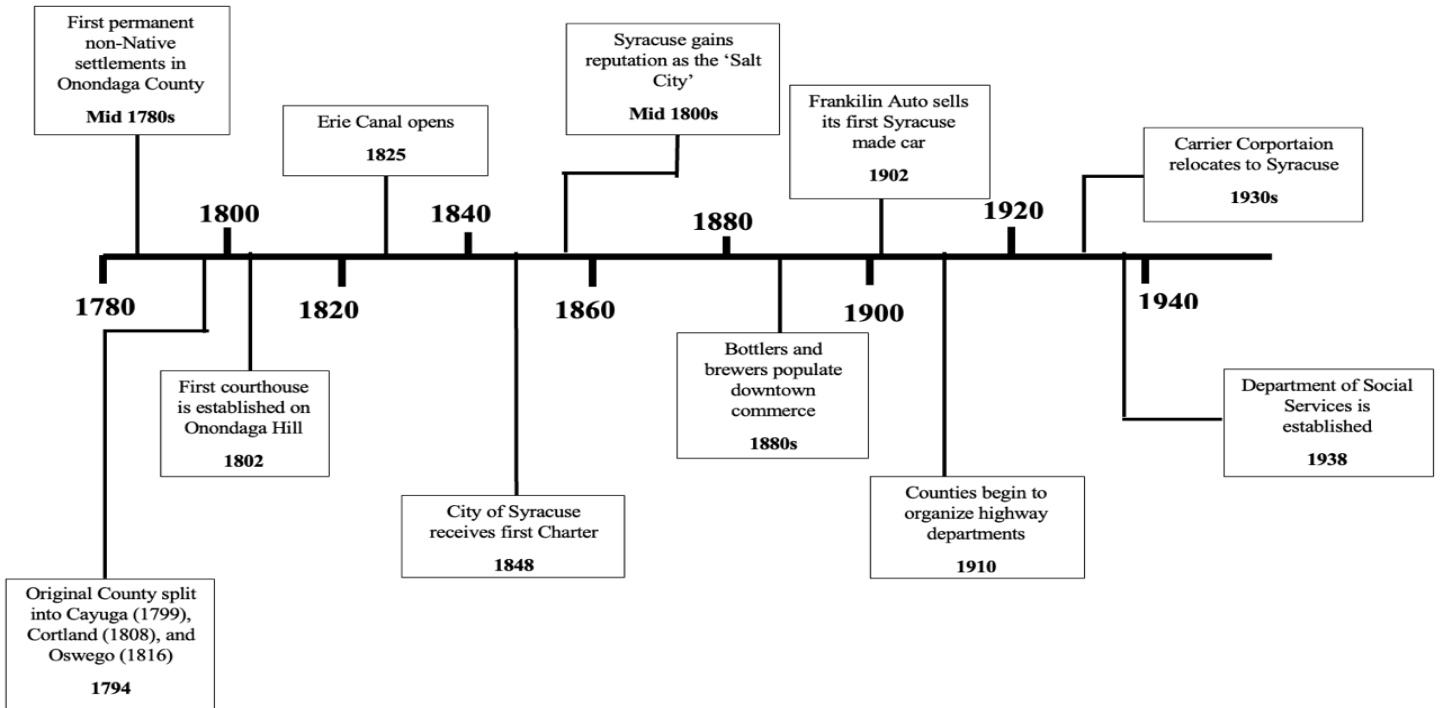
Population of Onondaga County and the City of Syracuse 1950-2019\*



Source: US Census Bureau

Figure 1.3

**The Early History of Onondaga County**  
1780 – 1940



# THE ONONDAGA NATION

## CHAPTER TWO

Information in this chapter was taken from "Neighbor to Neighbor Nation to Nation: Readings about the Relationship of the Onondaga Nation with Central New York, USA. The booklet was published by Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation (NOON) and revised and expanded in 2014.

### Government

The Onondaga Nation is a member nation of the alliance of the six Nations (Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk, and, later, Tuscarora) called the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Founded circa 909 by a man known in the native history as the Peacemaker, the alliance and law was the first United Nations and is still the oldest, continuously operating form of traditional government in North America. The government, created by the Peacemaker, is comprised of fifty Chief titles, representing the five original Haudenosaunee nations. Each Chief represents a Clan family and is a lifelong title. Alongside each Chief sits a Clan Mother who works with the Chief for the good of the people. In addition, Faithkeepers sit as assistants to the Chief and Clan Mother and see that proper procedures continue to be followed. The first Grand Council was held on the shores of Onondaga Lake, at the center of the confederacy, in Onondaga territory. The council continues to meet at the Onondaga Nation Longhouse today.

The Onondaga Nation is completely separate from any of Onondaga County's municipal operations. The Nation's volunteer fire department was created in 1955 and has a sovereignty agreement with the Onondaga County Sheriff's Department where the department will not enter the territory without permission, with the exception of life-threatening situations.

### Treaties and Land History

The first treaty between the Haudenosaunee and the Dutch was reached circa 1613. This is signified by the Two Row Wampum, or Guswenta. For the Haudenosaunee, this formed the basis for all future relations with European settlers and established the idea of two separate but equal nations that would respect one another's sovereignty. The Tuscarora nation was adopted into the confederacy in 1722 after being defeated by colonists in North Carolina. In 1754, Benjamin Franklin visited the council to discuss the structure of the Haudenosaunee government, part of which he borrowed for his Albany Plan of Union.

In 1784, the Treaty of Fort Stanwix ceded land north of the Ohio River to the Haudenosaunee. In 1790, President George Washington, concerned with New York's illegal taking of land from the confederacy, urged Congress to pass the Trade and Non-Intercourse Act of 1790 which provides that any taking of lands that do not involve the Federal government is "null and void." However, New York continued to purchase land from the Nation, and by 1822, the Onondaga territory was reduced to its current size of 7,300 acres.

In 1890, a schoolhouse was built in the Onondaga Nation. The native language was prohibited, and children were taught in English-only classes often being sent to boarding schools in western New York state and Pennsylvania. In another effort to increase socialization, the United States enacted the 1924 Citizenship Act granting U.S. citizenship to indigenous people. The Onondaga Nation refused to acknowledge this Act stating a violation of the Two Row Wampum agreement.

In 1972, Onondaga Nation School banned language and culture classes. In 1989, the New York Museum returned 12 wampum belts to the Onondaga nation. 200 ceremonial masks were returned 12 years later.

On March 11, 2005 the Onondaga Nation filed the Land rights Action seeking recognition of its aboriginal title over some 4,000 square miles of land and sought cleanup of the territory. This Action was dismissed in court and the appeal to review the ruling was refused in October of 2013.

## Lacrosse

The game of lacrosse is sacred to the Haudenosaunee and is known to the Onondaga Nation as Dehhontjihgwa'es, translated "they bump hips." It is said the original game was given as a gift from the Creator, exclusively to the male population, for healing and the proper applications of the mind, body, and spirit. When cultivated within the spirituality of the game, with dignity, respect, honor, and social recognition, the seed grows into recognizable leadership qualities, and the man emerges as a possible protector of his Clan and Nation.

The game is used to teach men the proper way to adulthood. From the moment a boy is able to hold the stick and comprehend the game, he is taught respect. According to natives, each man is given an equal amount of potential, and when he plays the game, his character emerges. A man's true nature is revealed in how he handles his own errors, and when he is given the ball, or opportunity, he is conditioned to trust his teammates to convert the opportunity into a benefit for the whole team.

In 1980, the Grand Council approved the initiation of the Iroquois Nationals, a field lacrosse team that competes with other lacrosse nations of the world. In July of 2010, the Nationals were prevented from competing in the World Lacrosse Championships, held in Manchester, England, because they were denied British visas when using their Haudenosaunee passports.

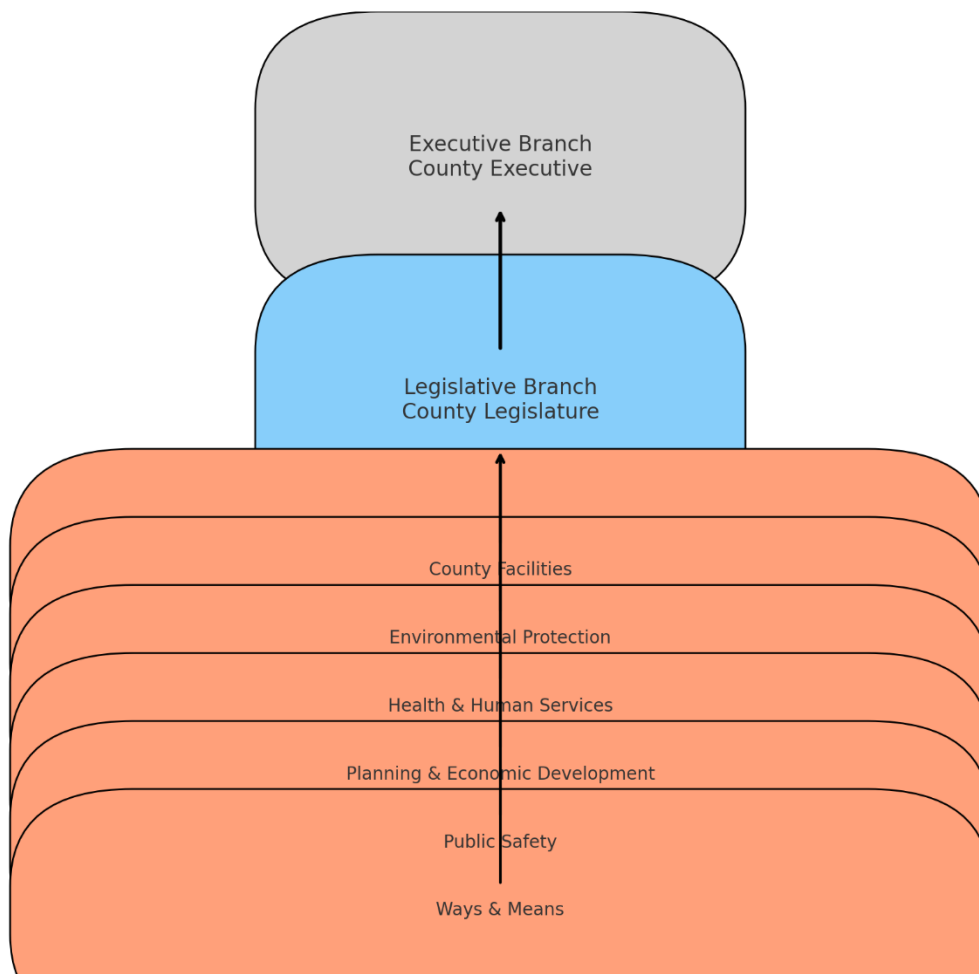
In 2015 the Onondaga Nation was host to the World Indoor Lacrosse Championship in Syracuse.

## Chapter Three

Onondaga County government operates under the same home rule chapter adopted in 1961 by a general referendum which established separate legislative and executive branches. The executive branch is headed by an elected county executive for a four-year term. The county executive duties include developing an annual and six-year capital budget, setting the equalization rate among taxing districts in the county, and appointing government officials.

The Onondaga County Legislature is the law-making body of the county government. The legislature has 17 members, elected from districts of nearly equal population. The district lines are adjusted as necessary following the release of the decennial US Census data. Legislators serve two-year terms. A chairperson is elected to head the legislative body and appoint committee chairs and members. The duties of the legislature include meeting monthly to appropriate funds, passing legislation, voting to confirm appointees of the county executive, and electing a chairperson. The county executive can veto legislation, but the legislative body can override a veto if the necessary support is present.

There are six standing committees of the legislature, as of 2020, including County Facilities, Environmental Protection, Health & Human Services, Planning & Economic Development, Public Safety, and Ways & Means.





# Onondaga County

County government is the administrative arm of the State, delivering various forms of health care, social services, the electoral process, and law enforcement to residents.

Onondaga County government provides regional infrastructure, including 829 miles of county roads and highways, a wastewater treatment service, a water system to bring Lake Ontario water to the suburbs, and maintenance of parks.

Onondaga County provides programs and services such as budget management, county-wide planning, economic development, additional health care, educational services (community college), 911 emergency communication system, public safety, and additional social services.

In order to fund the programs and services, Onondaga County works to increase its economic prospects through economic development projects. The Nicholas J. Pirro Convention Center complex and NBT Bank Stadium n economic development project aimed to enhance tourism in Onondaga County. The expansion of the previous Carousel Center in 2012 into Destiny, USA (the 8<sup>th</sup> largest shopping mall in the USA) is another example of an economic development project. A 2021 economic project is the Amazon distribution center under development in the Town of Clay. The project is expected to bring in \$40 million in revenue.<sup>3</sup>

Onondaga County also works to improve capital and infrastructure. The 2017-2022 Capital Improvement Plan outlines the county’s plans and indicates how the improvements are to be financed in compliance with the 2010 Development Guide for Onondaga County.<sup>4</sup> This plan seeks to meet the needs of the county by updating infrastructure and promoting a clean water environment. These improvements are funded through local sales taxes, real estate taxes, bonding (the act of taking out loans for projects), and federal/state grants.<sup>5</sup>

To promote sustainable development, the County Sustainability Development Plan was announced in 2012. It focuses on the benefits of land use planning, including preserving open spaces, improving air and water quality, reducing energy usage, supporting mass transit, and prioritizing infrastructure investments.<sup>6</sup> Sustainable development offers hope for a brighter and greener future for Onondaga County.

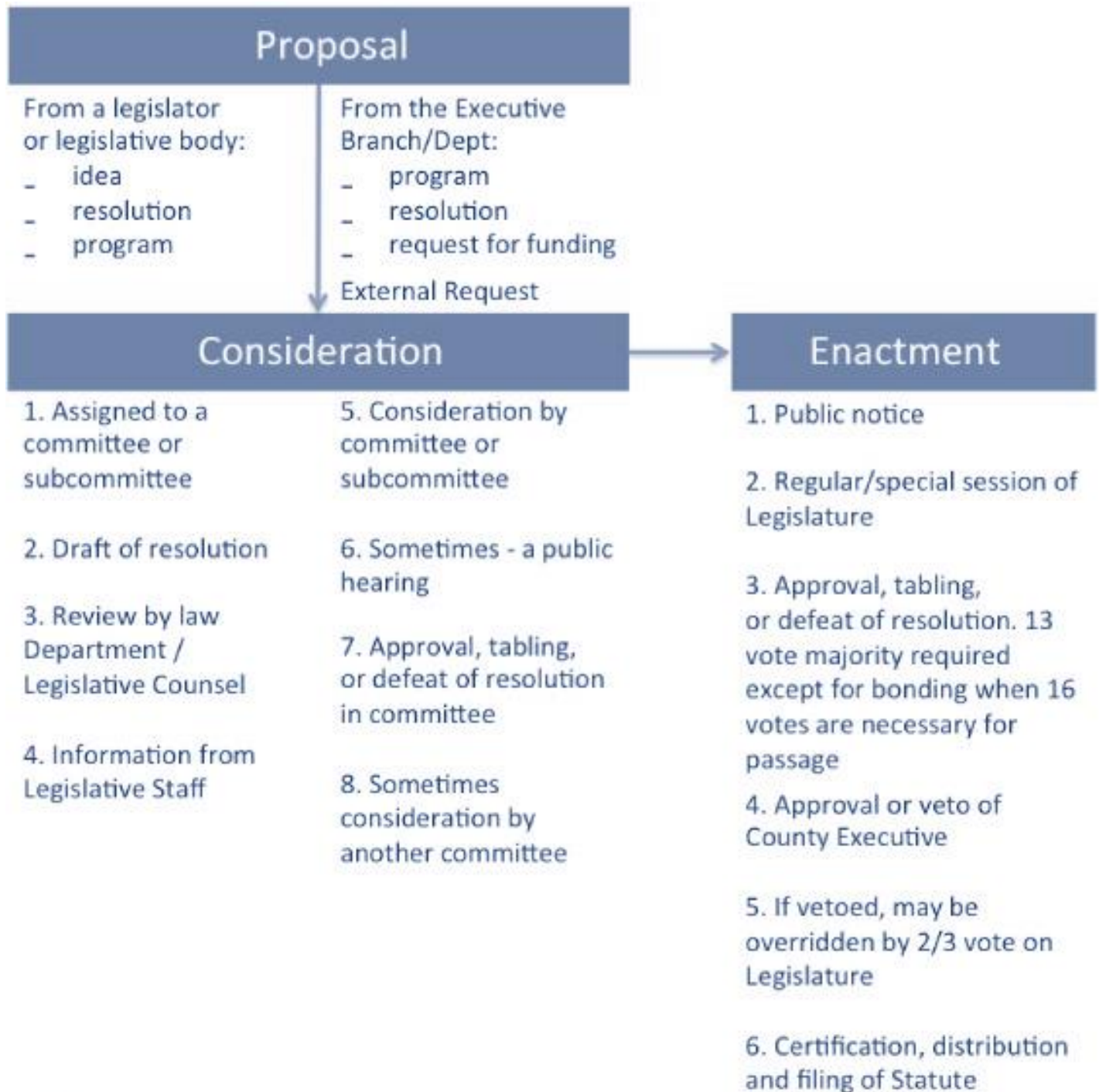
Another way Onondaga County works toward a greener future is by improving water quality in Onondaga Lake. The lake’s pollution is an environmental challenge for the county. Efforts to clean the lake range from local, state, and federal government interventions to involvement from and industrial giants found at fault.<sup>7</sup> The 2016 “Connect the Drops” anti-littering campaign to prevent litter contamination in Onondaga Lake is an example of a government effort to restore Onondaga Lake. In 2017, the EPA sued Honeywell forcing them to contribute 7.3 million dollars in restoration costs for the population they caused during the manufacturing process.<sup>8</sup> These efforts have led to improvement in the quality of Onondaga Lake.

Onondaga County has downsized in recent years due to budget cuts and external events. One external event that has and will be damaging to county government is COVID-19. COVID-19 has led to severe budget cuts and government layoffs that will continue to impact Onondaga County. The magnitude of these responsibilities places Onondaga County in the position of balancing local needs, federal funding, environmental issues, and maintaining infrastructure while improving the economic climate, and maintaining government jobs.

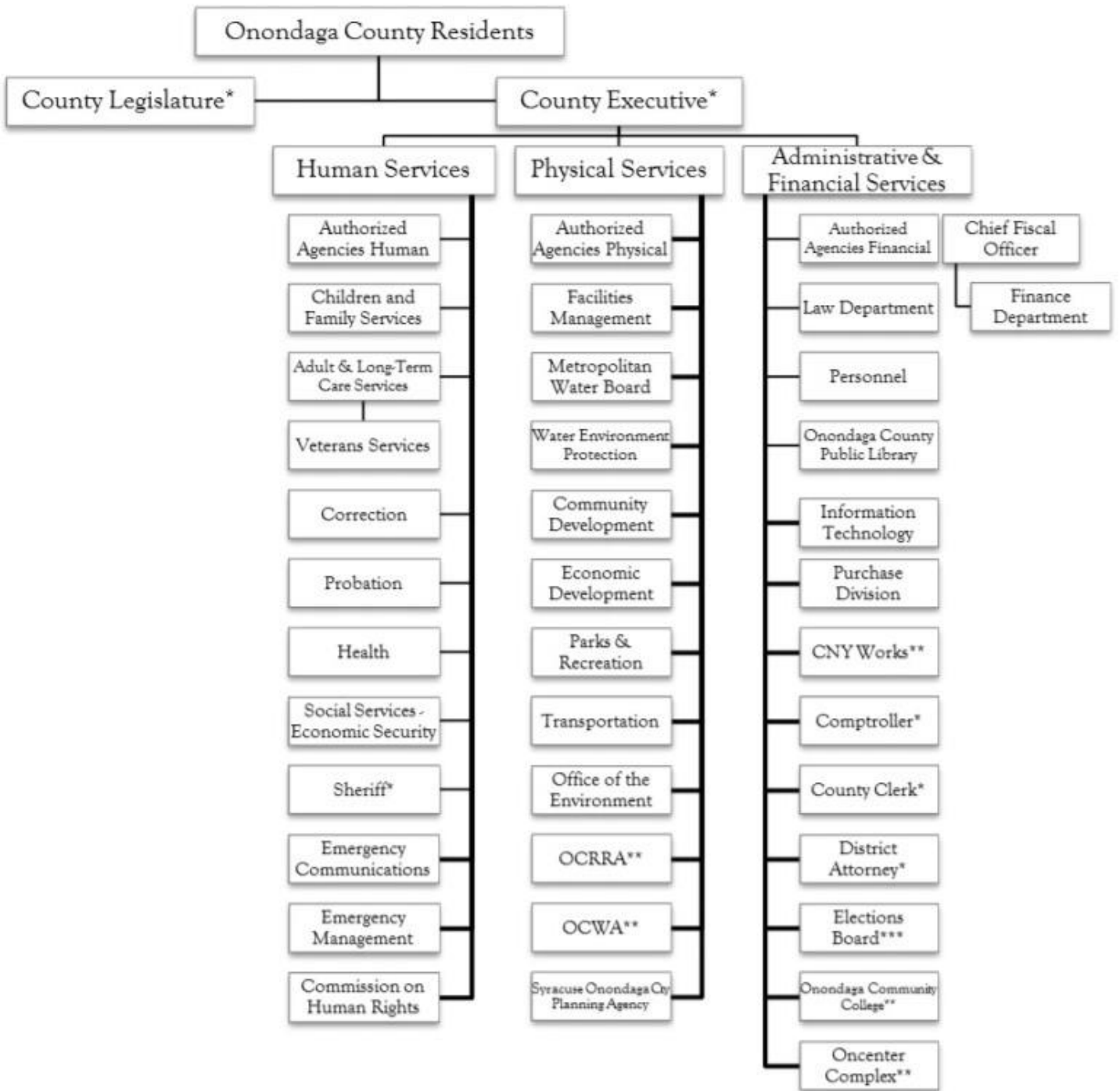
In 2012, the county legislature awarded a contract to FOCUS to collate all citizen visions from 1950 to present about restoring the shoreline of a clean Onondaga Lake. The project was updated with a study in 2017.

Source YSDA/FDA – Aerial Photography Field Office, 2011 Figure 3.1<sup>9</sup>





## Onondaga County Table of Organization



# Town Government Today

## Chapter Four

### Structure

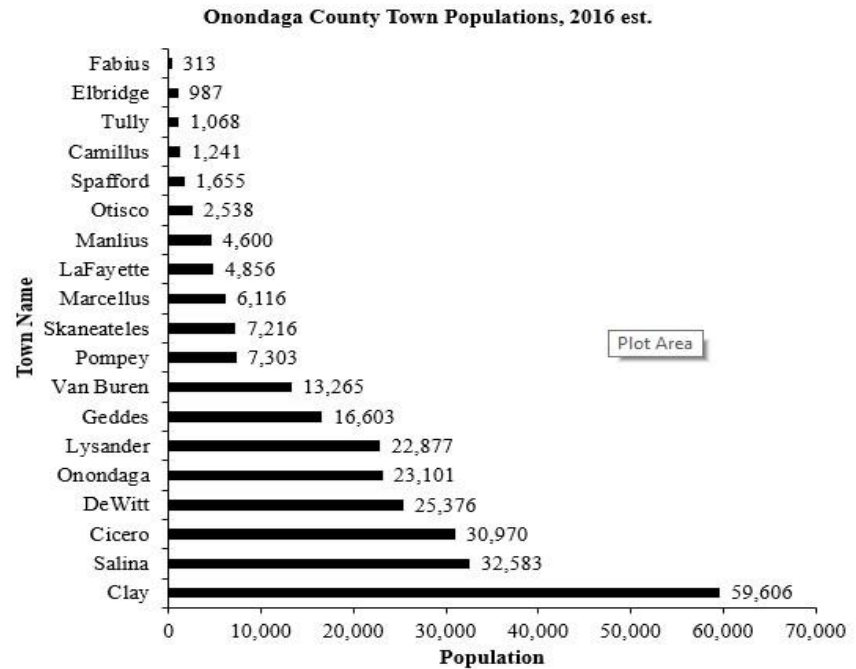
Structure and scope of the governmental powers of towns are defined in Town Law enacted by the New York State Legislature and in the New York State Constitution. In Onondaga County there are 10 first-class towns (population over 10,000) and nine second-class towns (population under 10,000).<sup>10</sup> Because of the pattern of metropolitan growth, the first-class towns are located in a ring around Syracuse and in the northern part of the county.

Town voters elect a supervisor who is the chief executive officer, as well as four to six representatives who, with the supervisor, constitute the town board. The town clerk, superintendent of highways, town justices and the tax receiver or collector are also elected. Exceptions are in the town of Salina, which has an appointed town clerk and highway superintendent, and the town of Clay which has appointed a highway superintendent.

### Services

Both population density and the value of taxable real estate influence the activities of town government, the services it provides, and the taxes necessary to pay for the services. As towns began to grow in population, there was an increasing tendency by some towns to provide the services traditionally considered to be the responsibility of city and village government. These services have been made available through special benefit districts and part-town districts.

Figure 4.1



Source: U.S. Decennial Census 2016 Est.

(Chapter 7 provides more information about the financing of these districts).

Special benefit districts are simple taxing units (not usually governing units) set up and administered by a county or town to provide many essential services (water supply, sewers, streetlights, etc.). The basic principle of the special district is the same one implicit in city and village incorporation: everyone within the defined taxing unit will benefit equally from the service and share equally in the cost.<sup>11</sup>

The special benefit district has been a significant factor in the decline of annexation and incorporation. It has provided towns and counties with the means for supplying many essential services to heavily populated but unincorporated areas and has relieved many of the pressures which otherwise might have led to more dramatic political reorganization.

The nature of suburban growth has resulted in a great upsurge in the number of special districts (See Figure 4.2). Each new housing tract may require the formation of a sewer, water drainage, hydrant, and lighting district. The fragment effect of numerous special districts can impose costly administrative burdens on both town and county as well as significant inequalities for the taxpayer. Since initial capital investments vary, it is commonplace for a suburban homeowner to discover his neighbor in another sewer district is paying higher or lower taxes for the same service.

Although the special district has proved an invaluable tool in helping towns and counties make the transition from rural to urban, it may work against the orderly and planned development of a community. It can also prevent the extension of improvements into less densely populated areas where terrain or distance makes total cost unusually high. Town boards are empowered to consolidate special improvement districts subject to the approval of taxpayers in the affected districts, but taxpayers are

often unwilling to give this approval due to the potential of increased costs.

Part-town districts are commonly used by towns that contain villages which already provide broad municipal services. Very simply, a part-town district includes all the territory of a town that is outside a village. The precedent for such a district was established originally as a part of the highway system. While the whole town is assessed for certain highway costs (snow removal, weed control, bridges, and machinery costs), only that part of the town outside the village pays for the maintenance of town roads.

Police, zoning and planning, refuse disposal, and parks and recreation are examples of the new uses of a part-town district. Its popularity as a solution to a growing problem caused the state in 1965 to create a new category of state aid which provided payments to towns for their "outside village areas."

The suburban town law allows another method for financing and administering services on the town level. Under a 1963 state law, densely populated towns with accelerated growth may adopt the status of a suburban town. This law permits a town to separate administrative operation from policy-making operations and to establish departments in town government. It also empowers a town board to abandon the special district in extending services and instead to use special assessment areas. The significant difference between the two is that the capital investment costs can be distributed over the much larger tax base of the whole town, with the benefited area paying a charge for the service itself. A suburban town may also dissolve existing special districts and arrange for their debt payments on a part-town basis. If town and village governments wish to cooperate, they may consolidate financing and provide services throughout the entire town. The law also permits town boards to regulate traffic and share in traffic-fine receipts as cities and villages do. The towns of Camillus, Clay, Geddes, and Onondaga have adopted the suburban town law. However, these towns have not used the full powers under the law.

# Local Government Consolidation

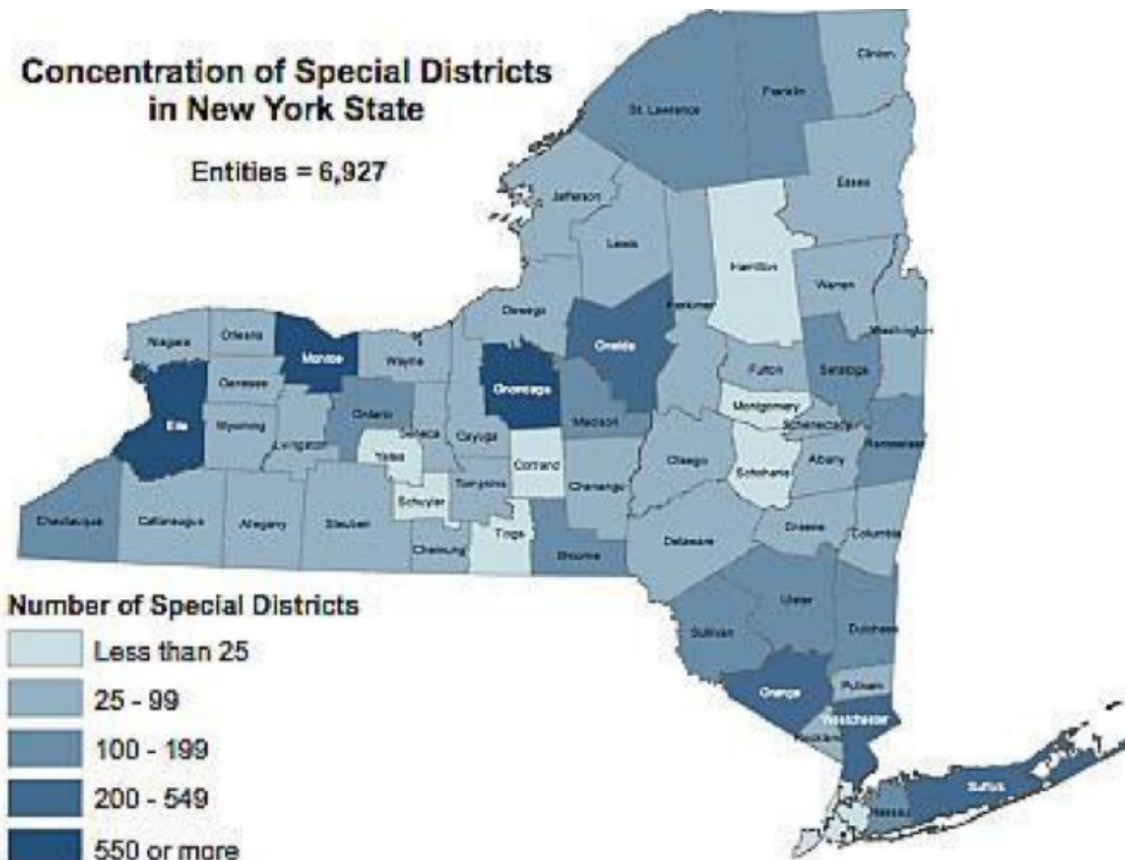
During tight fiscal times, the conversation regarding local government consolidation and shared services has become more widely accepted. Rather than large-scale consolidations of towns or villages across the county, many local governments have explored shared services and department consolidations. The citizen group Consensus proposed recommendations on consolidating local government services in 2016, which lead to a county-wide discussion of consolidation policy. In June 2017, Onondaga County Executive Joanne Mahoney constructed a council dedicated to saving taxpayer money through shared services.

Town supervisors and village mayors have looked at ways to eliminate a service or share the

cost of a service or equipment with a neighboring municipality. In recent years towns across Onondaga County have proposed a variety of shared services: property assessment, tax collection, animal control officers and comptrollers among other services. Specific examples of successful shared services recently adopted or currently underway include:

- In February 2011, residents of Geddes voted 530 to 55 to eliminate the position of town receiver of taxes. Previously the towns of Dewitt and Van Buren had eliminated this position.<sup>12</sup>
- In 2010, Skaneateles residents voted to close its 9-1-1 center.<sup>13</sup>
- In 2008, the town of Clay merged its police department with the Onondaga County Sheriff’s Department.<sup>14</sup>

Figure 4.2



# Village Government Today

## Chapter Five

### Structure

Village law and the New York State Constitution set forth the structure and powers of village government. Village governments are responsible for providing such services as police and fire protection, sewer, water, highway services and a court system. Villages are governed by an elected mayor and a board of trustees. The mayor and board meet once or twice each month in general sessions open to the public. The village justice is an elected position, but it is not required under law. In many villages the clerk and treasurer positions are sometimes combined into one position.

Other officials and department heads required to carry on the functions of a village are appointed by the mayor subject to the approval of the board of trustees. Prior to the 1972 recodification of village law, villages were classed according to population. The size (population, land area) of villages incorporated before 1973 varies greatly; there are now criteria established in the village law that determines standards for incorporation. One law now governs all villages.<sup>15</sup>

### Growth

Village population recently has mostly remained stable or declined. Only Baldwinsville has shown consistent population growth since 1960, according to the US Census. In 12 of the 15 villages the 2010 US Census population estimate was less than in 1990.<sup>16</sup>

Some villages have limited space for development while others have made deliberate attempts to avoid being engulfed by suburbia. Through their zoning powers, they have tried not only to preserve their identity, but also to conserve their historical character. Most villages have planning and zoning boards, with members appointed by the mayor. The current trend is for most villages to develop planning programs to structure future development of village land.

Planning programs are geared to suit different purposes. The village of Fabius limits the size and type of buildings that may be constructed<sup>17</sup>; the villages of Fayetteville and Skaneateles have historical preservation laws.<sup>18, 19</sup> Villages, which once served as commercial centers for a rural population, are now often centers for large suburban communities. This change has meant increased use of village streets, commercial establishments and – indirectly – public safety facilities, which in turn may increase village

costs. At the same time suburban growth has often meant a larger market for village-owned utilities.

Village governments are responsible for providing many of the same services as those required of larger, metropolitan governments.

Villages are surrounded by the jurisdiction of the town of which they are a part. For this reason, village taxpayers, who also pay town taxes, may be in a position of paying twice for the same service. Municipal contracts (provision of service by one government to another under the terms of a contract) are often used to avoid a situation where village taxpayers pay twice for the same service. The part-town districting device is also employed for this purpose in some instances. (See Chapter 4 for further discussion of the part-town district).

Due to financial constraints across the county many towns and villages have begun sharing services with each other and other municipalities and consolidating governments. This trend is expected to continue as local leaders face budget constraints.

# City Government Today

## Chapter Six

### Structure

In 1938, Syracuse established the current mayor-council form of government, with an emphasis on a strong executive branch. In 1960, a new city charter was adopted which added new departments and reorganized the administration of finances. During the 1970s, the charter was amended to update the functions of many departments. In 1985, the charter was again amended to prevent a person from serving as mayor for more than two consecutive four-year terms. Throughout these changes, the mayor-council form of government has remained intact.

The mayor, elected every four years, serves as chief executive of the City of Syracuse and is responsible for the day-to-day operations of city government. The mayor appoints all department heads, except the Commissioners of Education and the City Auditor, as well as members of various commissions and boards needed to administer the operations of the city. In addition to the Commissioners of Education and the City Auditor, the voters elect city court judges who preside over criminal, civil, traffic and small claims matters. The mayor is responsible for the oversight of city operations, which are administered through the various municipal departments of the city (Reference organizational chart at the end of this chapter).

From 2018 to 2021, several changes were made to the structure of city government, as seen in the organization chart. Key changes to the administration include the creation of the posts of Deputy Mayor, Director of Operations, and the Director of City Initiatives. Various departments were reassigned under the new organizational system, with the mayor overseeing a larger number of departments than in the previous structure.

CITY OF SYRACUSE  
COMMON COUNCIL DISTRICTS

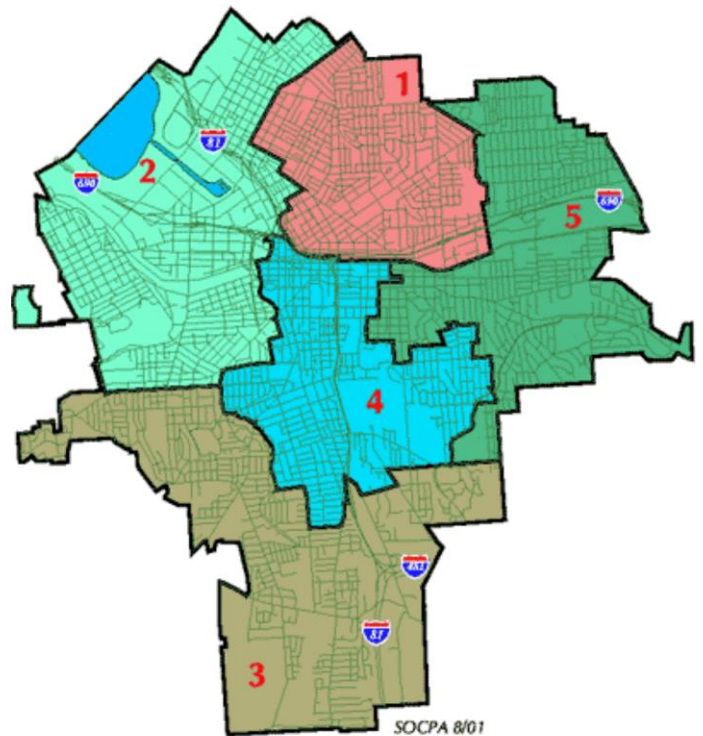


Figure 6.1<sup>20</sup>

For example, the creation of the Bureau of Administrative Adjudication was created in 2019 to handle property code violation cases that were previously handled by the city courts. The bureau was created to improve living conditions and address blighted properties within Syracuse.<sup>21</sup>



The Common Council is the elected legislative branch of government and is made up of nine councilors and one president. The president and four councilors-at-large serve four-year terms. The five district councilors, representing five distinct geographic areas of the city, serve two-year terms. The common council negotiates the city budget, and common council committees draft and review all legislation before it goes to the full council for a vote. City committees represent the areas of transportation, rules and procedure, economic development & planning, education & human development, finance, housing, recreation, public safety, public works, and city-county operations.<sup>22</sup> The mayor's approval or disapproval is required for legislation once it is approved by the common council. The mayor's veto may be overridden by a two-thirds majority of councilors.

The City Auditor is elected by voters every four years in a general election. The Department of Audit conducts an annual audit of the affairs of every officer, department, and board of the City, including the Board of Education and the Syracuse Housing Authority.<sup>23</sup> The Department of Audit is also responsible for rendering an opinion on the City's financial statements as a whole. All recommendations are communicated to the mayor, Common Council, and appropriate department heads and put on file with the City Clerk.

The City Clerk's office publishes the proceedings of the Common Council, processes all requests for common council legislation from city department heads and councilors, and prepares agendas for council meetings. The clerk records and certifies all city ordinances, resolutions and local laws enacted by the council. The City Clerk presides over public auctions of city property and is responsible for issuing and recording marriage, fishing, hunting, and dog licenses.

The Syracuse City School District has seven elected commissioners and is a self-governing body that appoints the superintendent of schools. Unlike most cities in New York, the "Big Five" cities (Albany, Buffalo, New York City, Rochester, and Syracuse), the school system is fiscally dependent on city government, meaning its budget is approved by the Common Council as part of the annual city budget and not directly by voters. (Chapter 7 further discusses the city budget and financing of city services).<sup>24</sup>

City court is comprised of three main divisions and represents the city's judicial branch. The criminal division is responsible for misdemeanors, domestic violence, drug charges, and other violations of a criminal nature occurring within the city limits. The civil division handles tenant/landlord disputes, civil lawsuits (up to \$15,000 limit, as of 2021), housing code violations, and small claims and commercial claims (up to a \$3,000 limit, as of 2021). The traffic division processes traffic violations and misdemeanors issued within the City of Syracuse, most of which are handled via mail. City court judges are elected by the voters to preside over all cases brought before city court and serve 10-year terms. More information is available in Chapter 10: Courts.

## Population and Economic Trends

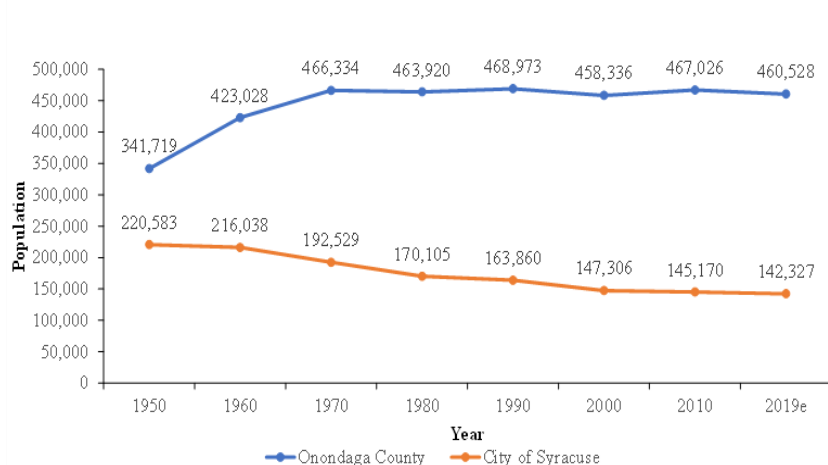
The 2019 Census estimate showed the population of the City of Syracuse to be 142,327, a small decrease from the 2010 Census figure of 145,170. Onondaga County's population decreased slightly from 467,026 in 2010, to a 2019 estimate of 460,528, indicating a relatively stable population (reference figure 1.2).<sup>25</sup>

The city's population loss trend began in the 1950's, with younger and older age groups increasing in population and the number of middle-aged wage earners decreasing because of migration to Onondaga County suburbs and elsewhere. A few contributing factors to this population decline include lack of new home construction in the city, loss of employment opportunities, outmigration, and the lingering effects of redlining.

Additionally, Syracuse has continued its legacy of attracting immigrants, becoming increasingly diverse over the years. Today, the city is home to many recent immigrants and refugees from Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa. As of 2019, nearly 13.1 percent of Syracuse residents are foreign born.<sup>26</sup>

As the core of a metropolitan center, Syracuse provides educational and medical services to the surrounding areas. Beginning in 1970, a revitalization effort redefined the City's focus toward new economic services and away from the declining manufacturing industry. Syracuse has since emerged as an economic service center, with new facilities being built in the fields of insurance, sports, conventions, transportation, and cultural activities. Syracuse remains a hub for the medical and education sectors.

Population of Onondaga County and the City of Syracuse  
1950-2019\*



## County-City Relationships

The Cooperation between city and county government is established in many areas within the framework of both levels of government. In 1938 and 1967, social welfare and health (respectively) became departments of county government, with the pre-existing departments serving as the nuclei for the new organizations. A 1968 merger resulted in:

- The formation of the Syracuse – Onondaga County Planning Agency.
- The establishment of the Onondaga County Department of Aging and Youth and the Human Rights Commission as joint city-county agencies.
- The Onondaga Public Library system administering its branch in downtown Syracuse, with city branches still funded by the city.

Later measures taken to further consolidate the county and city governments include:

- The City of Syracuse and Onondaga County merged their economic development departments in 2011 but reversed the decision in 2016.
- The City of Syracuse merged its Purchasing Office into the County's in 2011.
- In 2014, Onondaga County opened discussions with Syracuse for merging their park and sewer systems.
- In 2017, Onondaga County created a council dedicated to discussing shared services to comply with Gov. Andrew Cuomo's proposal to develop county consolidation plans across New York State.
- In 2017 an independent commission of business, government and community leaders coordinated by a Rochester-based consulting group released a report on three-years of convenings with a series of recommendations on potential areas for consolidation and shared services between municipalities in the county Organizational Chart.

Figure 1.2<sup>27</sup>

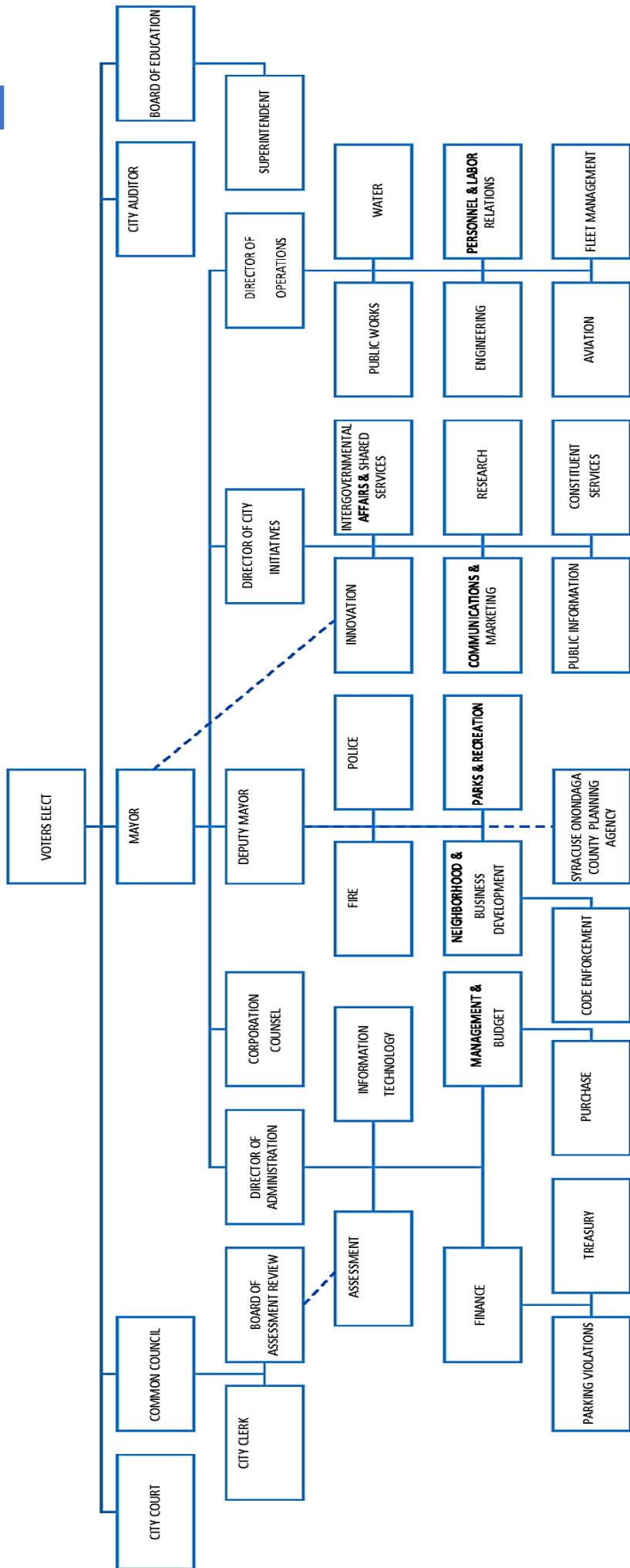


Figure 6.2  
Organizational Chart

# Financing Local Governments

## Chapter Seven

### Town/Village Budgets

The process of collecting money and paying for government begins with preparing the annual budget. A budget is a plan of action for the coming year expressed in dollars and cents. In other words, a budget is a plan the government uses to outline and reach its goals. Each year the supervisor of each town and village must submit a budget to their boards. The document outlines appropriations (estimated expenses) for the coming year along with anticipated revenues and their sources. A public hearing is held to enable citizens to ask questions and offer their opinions. Town board members and village trustees can recommend changes. Once agreement is reached, the municipality adopts the budget.<sup>29</sup>

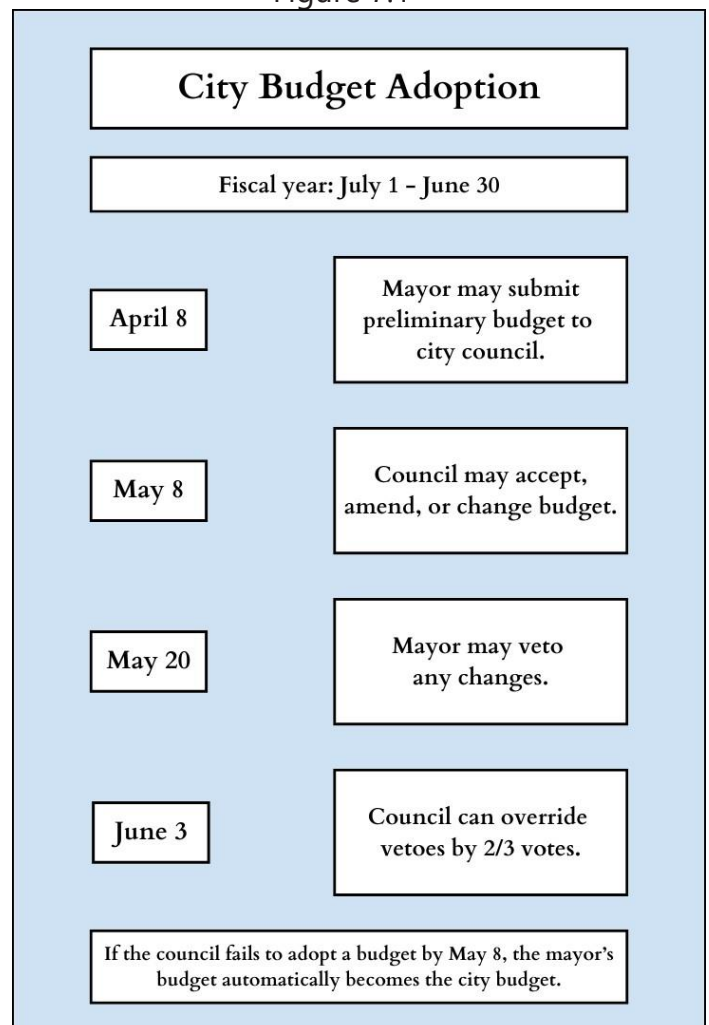
Deadlines for the submission and adoption of the budget are determined by Town/Village law. Once the governing board has adopted the budget by resolution, the administrative officials must follow it through the fiscal year or seek a revision from the town or village board if change becomes necessary.

### City/County Budgets

In Onondaga County, the county executive submits the budget to the county legislature for review and adoption. The county executive may veto increases or decreases made to the budget by the legislative body, which in turn may be overturned by a two-thirds vote of the legislature. The fiscal year corresponds with the calendar year.

In Syracuse, the mayor proposes a budget and submits it to the city common council for review and adoption.

Figure 7.1



## Town Budgets

Town budgets are primarily divided into four categories, which are coded by different letters in the town's budget:

- The town-wide general fund, which covers expenses charged to residents of the entire town (coded as A).
- The part-town general fund, which covers expenses charged to only those residents outside of incorporated villages located within the town (coded as B).
- Highway funds, which are those highway expenses charged to all town residents (coded as DA).
- Part-town highway funds, which are the highway expenses billed to residents outside of the incorporated villages (coded as DA).

Many expenses are coordinated by the town, but are essentially special district charges, such as fire protection, lighting, and water districts. The districts are established by the town on behalf of all residents living within the boundaries of the districts that receive the services and billed to those residents.

## Village Budgets

Unlike town budgets, village expenses are primarily included within one general fund and billed to all village property owners based on the value of their property. Some villages have independent water and sanitation services, and others contract other governments for these services. There are no separate funds or property tax levies for highway expenses.

More information about local budgets can be found in the New York State Comptroller's "Citizen's Guide to Local Budgets."<sup>85</sup>

## Revenue Source

Besides appropriations, the budget contains estimated revenues (income) for the coming fiscal year. Most local government revenues in New York State come from property and sales taxes, and aid from state and federal governments.

## Property Taxes

The property tax is paid by individuals and business that own real estate within a municipality. When a budget is prepared, all appropriations are added to get the estimated total expenditures. The amount of property taxes to be collected is determined by subtracting all other revenue sources from the estimated expenditures. The remainder is the amount to be raised through property. Revenue from property taxes is the last item entered into the budget each year.

## Constitutional Tax Limit

The New York State Constitution sets an upper limit on the amount of property tax that can be raised by counties, cities, and villages. For cities and villages, it is two percent of the full value of taxable property, averaged over the last five years; the

county limit is 1.5%. Towns have no

constitutional limit.<sup>30</sup>

## Sales Tax

New York State imposes a four percent sales tax on certain purchases. Counties and cities may impose up to a combined total of an additional three percent sales tax.<sup>31</sup> Some counties can add up to an additional 4 7/8% on top of the state's 4%.<sup>86</sup>

In Onondaga County, the sales tax is 4 percent. Revenue from this tax is distributed to the county, city, towns, villages and school districts via a sharing agreement. The county legislature determines the sales tax sharing agreement. In 2010 a 10- year agreement was made, and in 2019, this agreement was renewed until 2030. Prior to this agreement, Onondaga County used about 72 percent of sales tax revenues it collected and distributed the remainder. The agreement reduces the county's share to roughly 50 percent.

## State and Federal Aid

The largest uses of state aid in localities include revenue sharing, federal Consolidated Highway Program (CHIPs) for roads, and mortgage tax receipts. In 2023, the federal government sent the county about \$3.25 million through Department of Housing and Urban Development for community development and housing. These funds aid low-income and elderly residents and must be spent within low-income areas of the county as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau. For 2023 and 2024, Syracuse utilized approximately \$7.4 million in federal grant funding to address community housing needs. In 2016, the Onondaga Trails were granted \$5 million in federal funding for transportation projects. In 2021, the county received \$89 million from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), a bill which was part of the federal government's COVID-19 response. This funding was invested in infrastructure and economic development projects. In 2024, New York State received a \$13 million federal Homeland Security grant, a portion of which was allocated to both Onondaga County and the City of Syracuse for special security efforts, such as bomb squads, cybersecurity, and hazardous materials.

## Other Revenues

Other revenues available to municipalities include fines, license fees, permit fees, and fees for services provided to municipal governments. Funds from the sale or rental of public property and

equipment also provide income.

In addition, local governments receive franchise fees and gross receipts taxes on public utilities, such as power and cable TV companies. Municipalities elsewhere, with the approval of the state legislature, have accepted off-track betting revenues. Onondaga County does not but does get some share of funds from casinos in the state.

## Special Benefit Districts and Special Assessments

Residential developments, shopping centers, and industries outside of cities and villages are provided with many services by the town government. The special benefit district is the mechanism that allows property owners of an area to finance fire protection, sewers, water supply, and other services without taxing all residents of the town (see Chapter 4 for more information on special districts).

If a majority of owners representing the assessed property within an area petition the town board, local governments can create a special benefit district. Property owners within the district then pay for the services through a tax known as special assessments. This tax may be levied by assessed value, by the frontage length of the property, or as a flat rate called a unit charge.

The finances of each special benefit district must be reported separately from other government income and expenses. There are more than 1,000 special benefit districts in the towns of Onondaga County.<sup>32</sup>

## Assessment

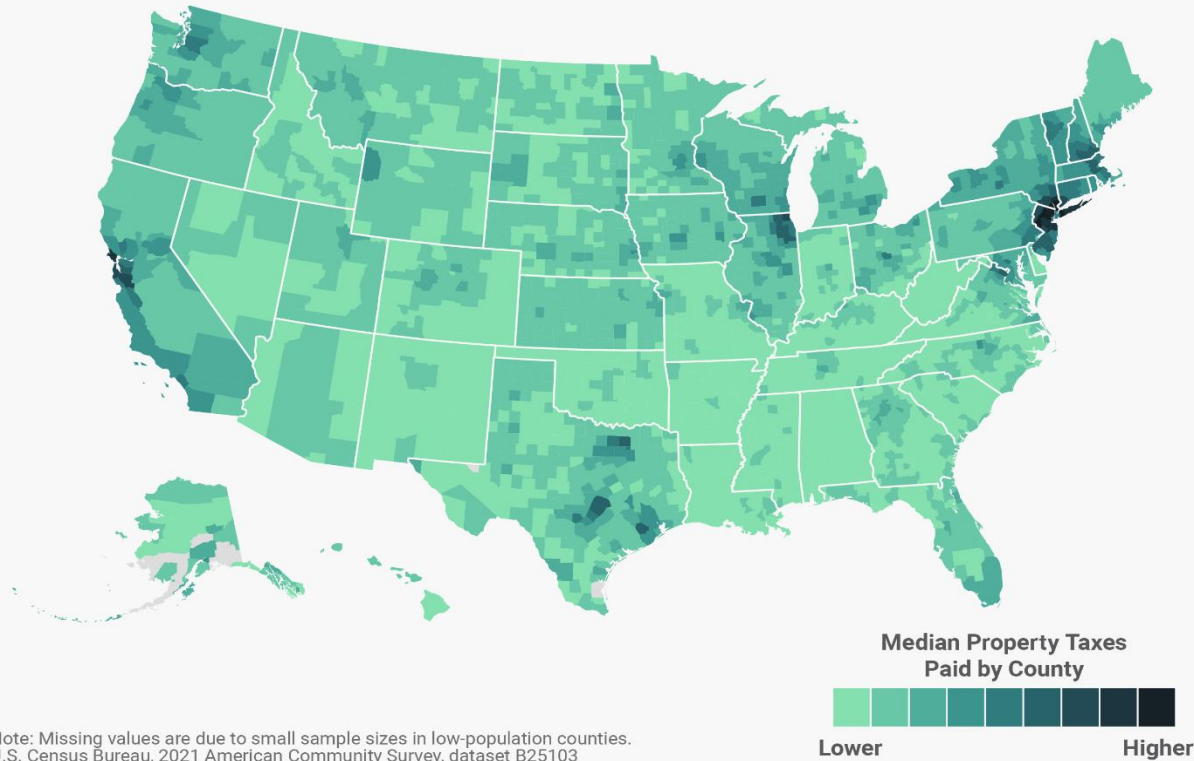
After the budget has been approved, tax bills are sent to taxpayers. Property tax is based on the value (ad valorem) of real estate. The process of determining property value for tax purposes is called assessment. The property inventory is available for inspection by appointment before the tentative assessment roll is filed. Property is valued as of Taxable Status Date (March 1 for the county, January 1 for the city). Property owners who disagree with the value assigned during the tentative roll may file a grievance. A Board of Assessment Review (BAR) hears grievances for each municipality.

During the BAR hearing, the BAR meets with the property owner while the assessor is present. The owner and the assessor present evidence to support their position on the value of the property. The BAR then meets without the assessor or the property owner present. The BAR may maintain or lower the assessment to a specific degree but may not raise the assessment. Property owners who disagree with the decision by the BAR may file for Small Claims Assessment Review.

Figure 7.2  
Median Property Taxes Paid on Owner-Occupied Housing by  
County, 2021

## Where Do People Pay the Most in Property Taxes?

Median Property Taxes Paid by County, 2021 (5-year Estimate)



Note: Missing values are due to small sample sizes in low-population counties.  
U.S. Census Bureau, 2021 American Community Survey, dataset B25103

Source: Tax Foundation

Before assessing any parcel of property, the assessor estimates its market value. Market value is how much a property would sell for in an open market under normal conditions. To estimate market values, the assessor must be familiar with all aspects of the local real estate market.

Each municipality has an elected or appointed assessor who is responsible for estimating the value of property within a city, town, or village. Assessors must obtain basic certification from New York State within three years of taking office. This requires the successful completion of seven basic certification courses that must be completed within the first three years. Continuing education is required to maintain certification – 12 credits annually. The New York State Assessors Association and New York State Board of Real Property Services oversee the courses.

Once the assessor estimates the market value of a property, the assessment is calculated. New York State law requires that all property within a municipality be assessed at a uniform percentage of market value. This percentage can range from one percent of market value up to 100%. This is referred to by municipalities as the equalization rate.

The equalization rate is the percentage of the fair market value of which a property is assessed for property tax. Most municipalities in Onondaga County have an equalization rate between 60% and 100%. To calculate full value using the equalization rate, assessed value is divided by the equalization rate. A home assessed at \$15,900 in a community assessed at 20 percent would have a full value of  $\$15,900 / 0.20 = \$79,500$ .

It is unlikely that any house that sells will be exactly equal to its assessment converted to full value. What is important is that it be as close as possible and that there not exist wide variations between assessed full value and sale price. Each year the Office of Real Property Services in the Department of Taxation and Finance conducts a market survey of home sales in every municipality. This survey is used to identify the accuracy of the assessments. This survey is also used to calculate the equalization rate.

The equalization rate is tied to the assessment to set the tax rate for overlapping jurisdictions. For example, school districts often cross town and village boundaries, which means properties are assessed at different percentages of market value. Changes in the equalization rate may cause tax bills to go up or down, even when the tax levy (the total amount of revenue needed to be raised through the property tax) remains the same. Equalization establishes a full market value for each municipality.

## Tax Exempt Property

Under state law, most properties owned by a government or by certain nonprofit organizations such as hospitals, religious bodies, human service organizations, and educational institutions, are not subject to property taxes. In addition, property owned by war veterans (see Table 7.1) and senior citizens may have a partial exemption from taxation.

Senior citizens, defined as persons 65 years of age or older, who meet certain income limitations and other requirements, may qualify for a reduction of assessed value of residential property.

Table  
7.1

Alternative Veteran's Exemption Rates		
Requirements for Eligible Veterans	Percentage Assessed Value Reduction	Maximum Exemption Rate Reduction (Equalized)
Wartime Non-Combat	15%	\$12,000
Wartime Combat	25%	\$8,000
Disabled Combat	25% plus 50% of the disability rate multiplied by the assessed value	\$40,000

\*Based on 2024 rates. Maximum exemption rates based on state low basic minimum.<sup>87</sup>

Source: New York State Department of Taxation and Finance





Taxpayers have many options for payment including in-person in Syracuse.

This reduction can range from 5 percent to 50 percent of assessed value, depending on income. The state legislature establishes the maximum exemption levels for senior citizens each year, and municipalities have the option of adopting assessment levels lower than those set by the legislature. In Onondaga County, citizens must apply for their exemption at the town level between January 1 and March 1 each year. In the city of Syracuse, seniors must file for an exemption annually before January 1<sup>st</sup> to receive it the following year. The property owner must be at least 64 years old to register, and proof of combined owner income of \$58,399.99 or less (based on the previous calendar year) is required. Senior citizens must reapply for the exemption each year because it is based on income levels.<sup>88</sup>

A few tax-exempt organizations, such as public and senior citizen housing developments, as well as some properties operating under agreements with an Industrial Development Agency, are subject to Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILOTs).

## Tax Procedure

During municipal budget preparation, governing bodies set the expenditure levels for each government department and calculate the revenue from the various sources outlined earlier in this chapter.

All revenue sources other than property taxes are subtracted from the expenses set by the governing body. The remainder is the amount which will have to be raised by property taxes.

Property tax rates are calculated based on the amount of money needed from property taxes (often referred to as the levy) and the taxable assessed value of all property within a municipality.

$$\text{Property tax rate} = \frac{\text{levy}}{\text{taxable assessed value}} \times 1000 \text{ mills}$$

For example, if a municipality needed to raise \$5 million in property taxes and had \$200 million in assessed value, the tax rate would be calculated as follows:

$$\text{Tax Rate to bring in } \$5,000,000 = \$25 \text{ per thousand} \times (\$200,000,000 / 1,000)$$

In this simplified example, a home assessed at \$80,000 would pay \$25 x (\$80,000 / 1,000) = \$2,000 in property taxes.

Depending on where you live, your property tax bill may look quite different. Many individuals do not see their property tax bill. Individuals with a mortgage on their property generally have their tax bill sent directly to the mortgage holder, which makes the tax payments directly to the municipality. Property owners with mortgages may pay a portion of their mortgage into a property tax escrow account every month so that the mortgage holder will have the funds available to pay the tax when due. In Onondaga County property tax bills are available to be viewed online, along with other information about each parcel including size, building style, location, owner, sales information, and more.

# Local Political Parties & Elections

## Chapter Eight

### Political Parties

Individuals participate in government at all levels by voting and enrolling in political parties. The structure of each party is used to choose candidates, organize campaigns, and eventually find staff for elected candidates.

Recognized political parties in New York State are the Democratic, Republican, Conservative, and Working Families parties. A recognized party is one whose candidate for president or governor received at least 130,000 votes or two percent of total votes in the most recent presidential or gubernatorial election XV.<sup>33</sup> New York State allows fusion candidates, which allows one candidate to be run by multiple parties. Other independent groups or new parties may organize to run one or more candidates in a single election as unrecognized parties.

State law requires the recognized parties to maintain county organizations, referred to as committees. As of 2021, only Republican, Democratic, and Conservative Parties have recognized county committees in Onondaga County. The Green, Independence, Libertarian, and Serve America parties all lost statewide ballot standing following the 2020 election because they failed to receive 2 percent of the votes.

Each county organization has great freedom in making party rules to govern its operations. For instance, each of the recognized parties may hold primary elections, although a primary is required only when there is a contest within the party for the nomination to party position or public office.

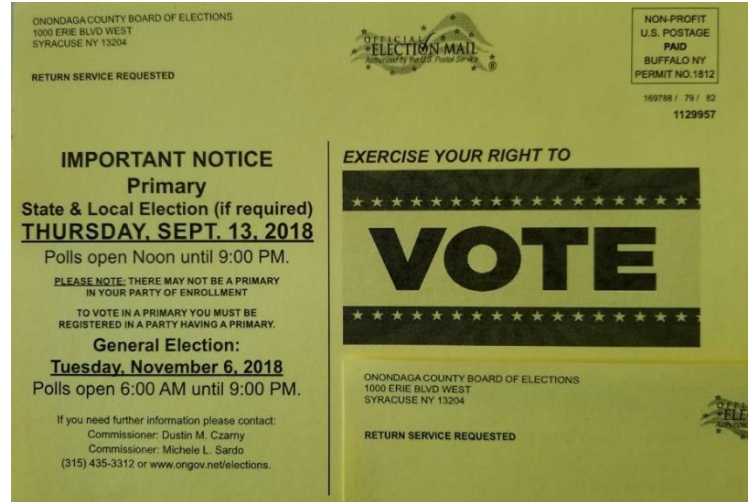


# Party Organization

The basic geographic unit through which the political party functions is the election district. In 2019, there were 433 such districts in Onondaga County, established by the Syracuse Common Council and the town boards of the 17 towns in the county. Four of these districts are non-working districts, which are in areas with no voters, like industrial parks.<sup>34</sup> An average number of registered voters in each district of 683. <sup>35</sup> Each official political party has the power to designate two to four committee persons per election district. The Republican and Democratic parties designate two committee persons to serve in each election district while the Conservative Party tends to select three or four committee persons.

Appointments to the political party's committee may be made at its annual full-county membership meeting. Usually, the person seeking a committee post obtains a petition, has it signed by registered members of his/her party, and returns it to the County Board of Elections. If unopposed, the petitioner's election to the committee is automatic. In cases when there is an opposition candidate, voters in the party make the final decision during the primary election. This process is repeated in even years.

The committee people who compose the party's county committee elect a chair and other officers to carry out the year-round political business. A smaller body, the executive committee, may handle housekeeping functions, grievance matters, nomination of candidates for party and public office, and the authorization of candidates not enrolled in the party.



The Board of Elections mails voters reminders.

Town and ward committees are made up of the election district committee persons. These committees are tasked with collecting petition signatures to officially nominate candidates. Each town has a committee, whereas ward committees are formed within the City of Syracuse. There are 17 town committees in Onondaga County, reduced from 19 in 2010, and 19 ward committees in the City of Syracuse. The two towns of Salina and Camillus have established wards as units for electing town councilors, but the political parties do not use these wards extensively for organizational purposes.

Political clubs assist the town or ward committee by providing workers for the campaign, contributing funds to the committee, and keeping members informed on issues. Ethnic groups and/or geographical location may be influential factors in organizing clubs. Political clubs formed within the Democratic Party must have written approval of the party's executive committee. Clubs function more loosely within the Republican Party as small branch of the town or ward committees.

## Nomination of Candidates

Various party rules and state election laws outline the way candidates for all public offices are nominated and selected. Parties choose candidates by a petition, caucus, or convention process-- the major political parties use all three processes. The town committees of each party can decide the method of candidate selection.

Candidates for Congress, the State Legislature, and countywide and citywide offices are most often designated by petitions. Depending on the level of office, petitions are filed with either the county or state board of elections. Petitions bearing the name of the candidate and the office sought are circulated among registered members of the candidate's party, whose signatures ultimately decide the nomination. The exact number of signatures required varies with the level of office sought and the political party of the candidate. Generally, candidates are required to collect signatures of at least five percent of the voters enrolled in their party. There are also petition format requirements and rules on who may collect petitions, reporting requirements and filing deadlines. This information can be obtained from the County Board of Elections.

Additionally, citizens who are not enrolled in a political party may run for office. They may circulate independent nominating petitions or be authorized by the executive committee of a political party. A person does not need to be registered to vote to be a candidate.

State Supreme Court candidates are chosen by delegates to a judicial convention held in each of the state's 12 judicial districts. Onondaga County is in the fifth judicial district. State Supreme Court justices are elected to 14-year terms, with a total of 328 serving at any given time.<sup>36</sup> More information can be found in Chapter 10: Courts.

## The Board of Elections

The Onondaga County Board of Elections is a county office administered by two commissioners, one Democrat and one Republican, appointed by the county legislature on the recommendation of the county committees of each party. Commissioners serve for two-year terms and may not hold elected public office (except for certain town and village positions) during their terms. The Board of Elections is responsible for the registration of all voters within the county, maintaining extensive voter registration records, and the conduct of all national, state, county, city, and town elections. The Onondaga County Board of Elections does not have jurisdiction over village, school, water, or fire district elections.

The election commissioners train and appoint four election inspectors, two Democrats and two Republicans, to be present at each polling place in the 19 towns and the 19 wards in Syracuse for primary and general election days. Election inspectors are recommended for appointment for a one-year term by their respective political party chairpersons and are certified by the Board of Elections after successfully completing a written test. Political parties and candidates may have poll watchers present at each polling place. The watchers must be registered voters in the county and appointed by written certification from the party committees or from the individual candidate's committees.

## Voter Qualifications

To vote in New York State, one must be a registered voter. To register to vote, a person must meet the following requirements:

- U.S. citizen (by birth or by naturalization)
- 18 years old by the date of the primary, general, or other election
- Reside at your present address for at least 30 days before an election
- Not be incarcerated or on parole of a felony conviction
- Not claim the right to vote elsewhere

A person may enroll in one of the recognized parties in the state. Voters may also change their party affiliation, but enrollment in a different party will not go into effect until after the General Election in the year the enrollment change is requested. While enrollment in a political party is optional, New York State holds closed primaries, meaning to vote in a political party's primary election, one must be enrolled in that party.

The state legislature sets the date for primary elections during the spring legislative session. The primary is usually conducted within the first two weeks in June, a recent change made by the New York State Board of Elections to consolidate its election process. Previously, New York State had separate primary dates for federal, state, and local elections. This consolidation aims to reduce voter confusion and increase voter turnout. General Election Day is always the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November.

An individual may register to vote by mail by simply calling the County Board of Elections and requesting a registration form. Forms are also available at many public agencies and at most post offices. Citizens can also apply to register when they apply for their driver's license, renew their driver's license, or apply for other state services.

The COVID-19 pandemic saw mail-in voting become a necessary method for voting in Onondaga County and the State of New York. The 2020 election saw Onondaga County process over 68,000 absentee ballots, which is over half of the 111,000 total ballots cast.<sup>37</sup> This is over quadruple the amount requested for the 2016 election, which totaled at 15,000.<sup>38</sup> It is unclear whether or not mail-in voting will become a norm in upcoming elections. Although no issues surfaced in Onondaga County, nationwide fears of voter fraud were found to be false following multiple investigations, meaning mail-in ballots are a safe and secure method of casting a ballot.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic saw early in-person voting become available on a state-wide level for the first time during the 2020 election.<sup>39</sup> Ballots could be cast in person beginning one week before Election Day. New York State joined a growing number of states to expand early in-person during the pandemic. The risk of exposure to the virus made the dispersal of voters a priority among state election officials, with early in-person voting helping to prevent the spread of COVID-19 at the polls. As of early 2021, it remains unclear if these changes will be permanent.

## School and Village Elections

The county board of elections does not supervise voting in school districts outside of Syracuse, or in fire districts, water districts, and villages. To vote or run for office in one of these jurisdictions, a person must be 18 years of age by election day, a citizen of the United States, and a resident of the state and district or village for thirty days prior to the election.

While the Syracuse City School District is unique in being wholly within the City boundaries, the remaining 17 districts in the county cut across local government boundaries in a quilt pattern. The County Board of Elections oversees voting for the City of Syracuse but not for other school district offices, which come under the jurisdiction of their respective school boards. School board candidates in districts outside of Syracuse must submit nominating petitions to the school district clerk. District voters determine whether candidates for the board will run at-large, with all the candidates competing for all available seats, or if a candidate must seek a specific seat on the board. Depending on district size, school boards consist of five, seven or nine members who hold terms of three to five years.

Under state election law, the village clerk is the "election officer" of the village and is responsible for the general conduct of all village elections, usually held in March or June. Many candidates for village offices do not run under popular political party labels but under the banner of independent groups such as Citizens' or People's Parties.

## Chapter Nine

### State Supervision

Although not well known, the University of the State of New York (USNY) [Not to be confused with State University of New York (SUNY)] is the state's governmental umbrella for many aspects of education in the state, including K-12 schools, public and private colleges, museums, and libraries. The Board of Regents heads USNY and determines education policy for New York state.

The state legislature elects 17 regents who serve five-year terms. The regents choose a commissioner of education who heads the State Education Department and also serves as the president of the University of the State of New York. Generally, the regents set policy while the commissioner has responsibility for carrying out those policies.

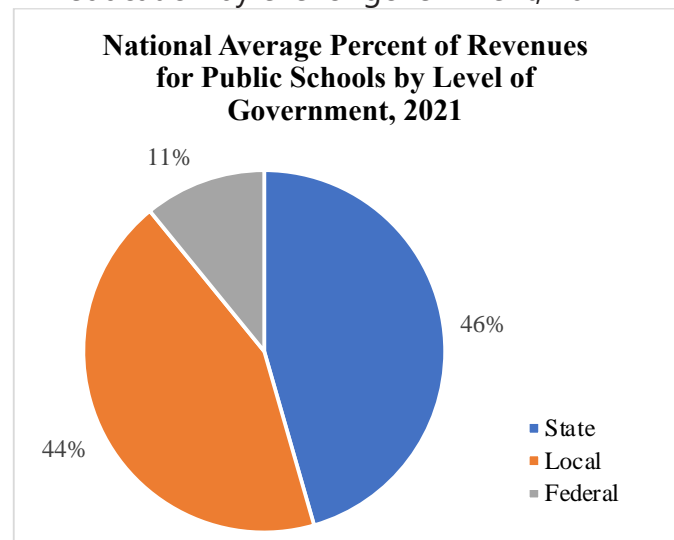
The department distributes state and federal aid to fund education. New York State provides financial assistance to public school districts using a formula that depends on a combined wealth ratio for each school district.

### Local School Organization

There are 18 school districts in Onondaga County, with the Syracuse City School District (SCSD) at its center. As of 2016, there were approximately 64,000 K-12 students in the county, of which approximately 20,000 attended the city school district.

The SCSD is administered by the superintendent of schools, appointed by an elected seven-member Board of Education. Since 1980, the board members have received a small stipend for their

Figure 9.1  
National average percentage of revenues for public elementary and secondary education by level of government, 2021<sup>84</sup>



services. Because the SCSD budget is not submitted to voters for approval, it is dependent on the city administration for its funds. The amount the city can raise in taxes for all services, including education (as discussed in Chapter 7), is limited by the New York State Constitution.

Outside the city, there are 17 other school districts in Onondaga County. Voters in these school districts elect people to serve on their board of education, which vary in size from five to nine members. Budgets are prepared by school officials and adopted at an annual meeting of school district voters or by a special election. Unlike the city school district, these districts are independent of all municipal governments for funds; their physical boundaries do not coincide with town or village lines. Each of these districts is administered by their own superintendent, appointed by the district's board of education.

## BOCES

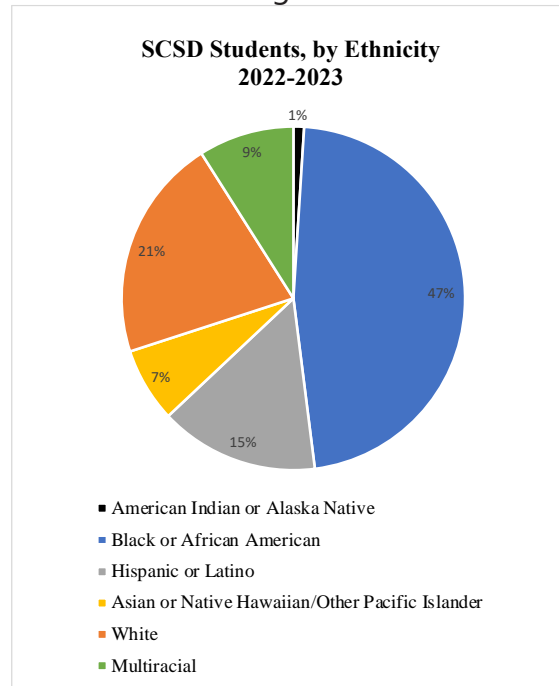
All school districts within Onondaga County, with the exception of SCSD, are members of a Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES); 15 districts are members of the Onondaga-Cortland-Madison Board of Cooperative Educational Services (OCM BOCES) district, which also includes Cortland County and part of Madison County. The remaining two districts, Jordan–Elbridge and Skaneateles, are members of the Cayuga-Onondaga BOCES. Schools like SCSD and East Syracuse Minoa are comprehensive schools and offer BOCES comparable training and education, such as vocational training and special education programs.

State law intended that each BOCES district serve as a way for districts to cooperate in providing services that they would not, individually, be able to in a cost-effective manner. That same law excludes the state’s largest cities from being part of a BOCES. The OCM BOCES district, with 23 component school districts, is led by a district superintendent who works both for the BOCES and the State Education Department, supervised by the commissioner of education.

The state government provides aid to school districts that use certain BOCES services and enables individual districts to share expensive services cooperatively. OCM BOCES provides direct educational programming to 64,700 students across Onondaga County in career and technical education (CTE), alternative education, and special education. Through its instructional support programs, OCM BOCES provides staff development services, leadership support and technical assistance. BOCES also provides shared services to help districts save money, including cooperative purchasing, central business office services, food service management, energy management, and technology services.

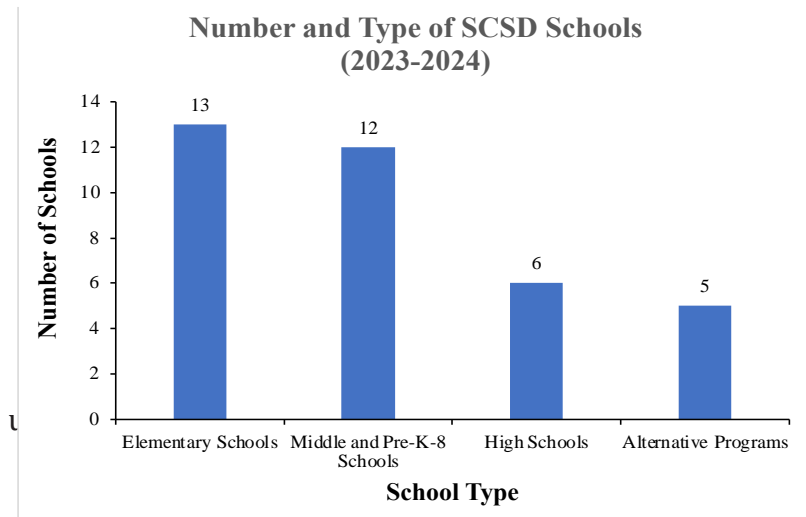
perimeter. With over 19,000 students in K-12 and just under 1000 in pre-kindergarten, the SCSD is the largest and most complex in the county.<sup>41</sup> In the suburban areas, the districts tend to be compact with relatively high pupil density, while in the rural areas districts are geographically larger with lower pupil density.

Figure 9.2



Source: New York State Education Department

Figure 9.3

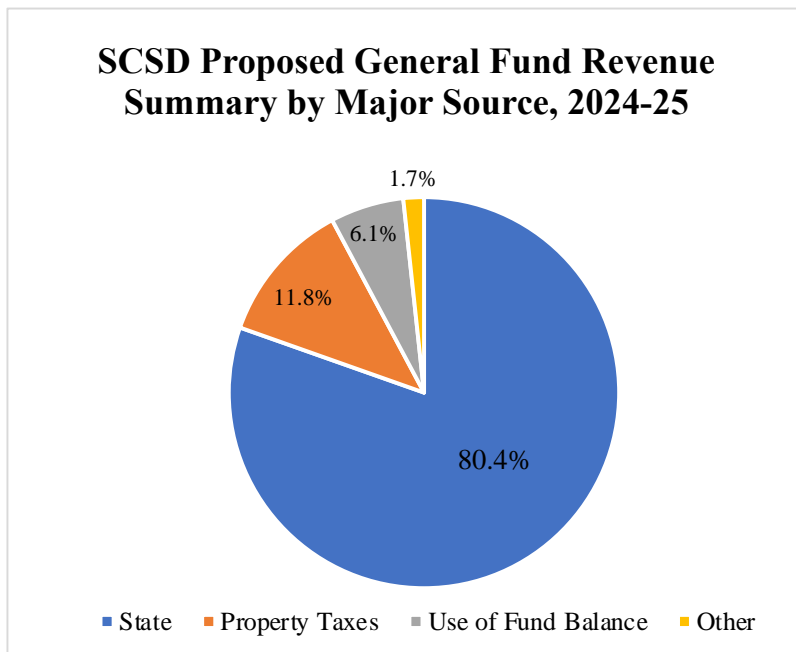


Data Source: Syracuse City School District

## School District Characteristics

The 18 school districts within Onondaga County vary widely in size and character. They reflect the diversity of a county comprised of a large urban center surrounded by suburban areas and some

Figure 9.4  
SCSD Funding Sources



Source: Syracuse City School District Adopted Budget 2024-25

The SCSD is facing many of the same challenges that urban districts face everywhere: poverty and a diversity of heritage languages. More than 70 different languages are spoken in SCSD schools. The percentage of students of color grew from 47% in the 1980s to 77% in 2016. During the same time, the percentage of low-income children increased from 50% to 79%. The district's strategic plan, *Great Expectations*, outlines ambitious goals for improvements in student achievement and increased opportunities for success.

Say Yes to Education, Inc. is a nonprofit education foundation that aims to dramatically increase high school and college graduation rates for urban youth in the United States. Say Yes provides comprehensive support, including the promise of free college tuition to one of nearly 100 colleges and universities for those who meet residency, graduation and admission requirements. Although there are Say Yes chapters located in major cities along the east coast, the Syracuse chapter is the first Say Yes chapter to embrace an entire city school district, making it the nation's largest school improvement program of its kind.<sup>42</sup>

## Suburban and Rural School Districts

Recognizing that the world has changed, a regional vision for college, career and citizenship readiness among the OCM BOCES districts has emerged. The regional vision is founded on an uncompromising and relentless commitment to preparing students for college, career and citizenship – in other words, preparing students for their future. At the heart of the regional vision are three commitments:

Providing instruction that engages, a culture that empowers, and technology that enables. Students can meet (and exceed) the New York State Learning Standards in ways that are meaningful and relevant, thus increasing the likelihood for future success.

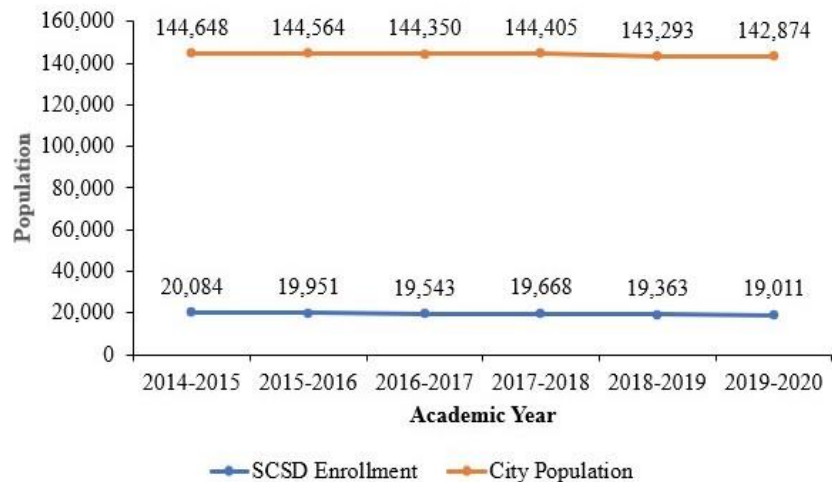
The regional vision includes, but is not limited to, the creation of “New Tech High Schools” in the OCM BOCES. These schools will be places where the instruction is engaging, the culture is empowering, and the technology is enabling. Surrounding these schools will be adult learning, where educators come to learn about creating schools where these qualities exist. Partnerships with higher education, business, and teacher preparation programs are integrated in the regional vision.



## Non-Public Schools

There are a variety of non-public schools serving students in the area. The Roman Catholic Diocese of Syracuse operates a parochial school system in the county, with 21 schools in seven counties across Central New York. Due to decreasing enrollment and tightening financial situations, a number of Catholic schools in the area have closed. The Diocese remains committed to providing rigorous, relevant and faith-based education opportunities in the community. Other private schools, both religion-based and secular, are available in the county including Christian Brothers Academy, Manlius-Pebble-Hill School and The New School. Several charter schools are now operating within the city, including the Syracuse Academy of Science and Southside Academy.

Syracuse City School District K-12 Enrollment from Academic Years 2015-2016 to 2019-2020

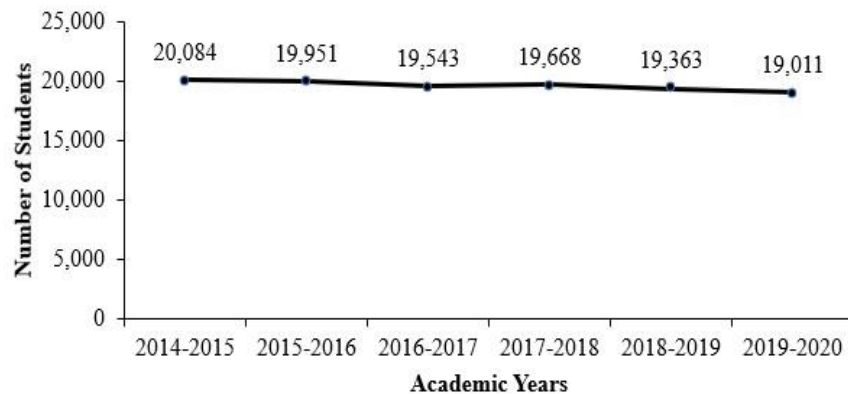


## Higher Education

Many opportunities for higher education exist in Onondaga County. The public institutions, all part of the State University of New York (SUNY), are SUNY Upstate Medical University, SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, Empire State College, and Onondaga Community College. Onondaga Community College is funded in part by the Onondaga County Legislature. The college offers a two-year program and its campus is in the town of Onondaga. Other nearby SUNY schools include SUNY Oswego in Oswego county and SUNY Morrisville in the village of Morrisville. In 2015, SUNY Oswego opened the Metro Center, a branch campus in Syracuse.

Syracuse University is the largest private institution in Onondaga County, followed by Le Moyne College. There are also numerous business and vocational schools.

Syracuse City School District K-12 Enrollment from Academic Years 2015-2016 to 2019-2020



Source:

<https://data.nysed.gov/archive.php?instid=800000040902>

## Chapter Ten

### State Administration and Financing

The statewide court system is administered by the Office of Court Administration, its policy-making body. Its Administrative Board consists of the chief judge of the Court of Appeals, who acts as chairperson, and the four presiding judges of the Appellate Divisions of the Supreme Court. The state's geographic area is divided into four judicial departments and 12 judicial districts. Each of the four departments is under the direction of one of the four presiding judges of the Appellate Divisions of the Supreme Court.

The state assumes the costs of operating the courts in New York State, as well as the costs of the Office of Court Administration, which executes the policies of the Administrative Board. Additionally, the Office of Management Support monitors all expenditures of the courts and oversees an internal audit procedure. The costs of some of the lower courts are still the responsibility of the towns and villages they serve. State law mandates that the county reimburse justices who perform services outside the towns and villages of their own jurisdiction.<sup>43</sup>

The chief judge, the state's chief judicial officer, is appointed by the governor from a list of seven candidates. Judges of the Court of Appeals are appointed from a list of three to five candidates recommended by the Commission on Judicial Nomination, and they must be approved by the state Senate. The Governor also appoints members of the Appellate Division from among justices of the Supreme Court. Judges in the lower courts in Onondaga County are elected.

### Appellate Courts

The Court of Appeals, the state's highest court, hears cases on appeal from the other appellate courts. Its review is limited primarily to questions of law.

Appellate Divisions of the Supreme Court are established in each of the state's four judicial departments to hear appeals concerning civil and criminal cases. The First and Second Departments hear appeals originating from the civil and criminal courts in New York City. In the Second Department, civil and criminal cases originating in district, city, town and village courts are also heard. The Third and Fourth Departments initially hear appeals from city, town, and village courts in the appropriate county court.

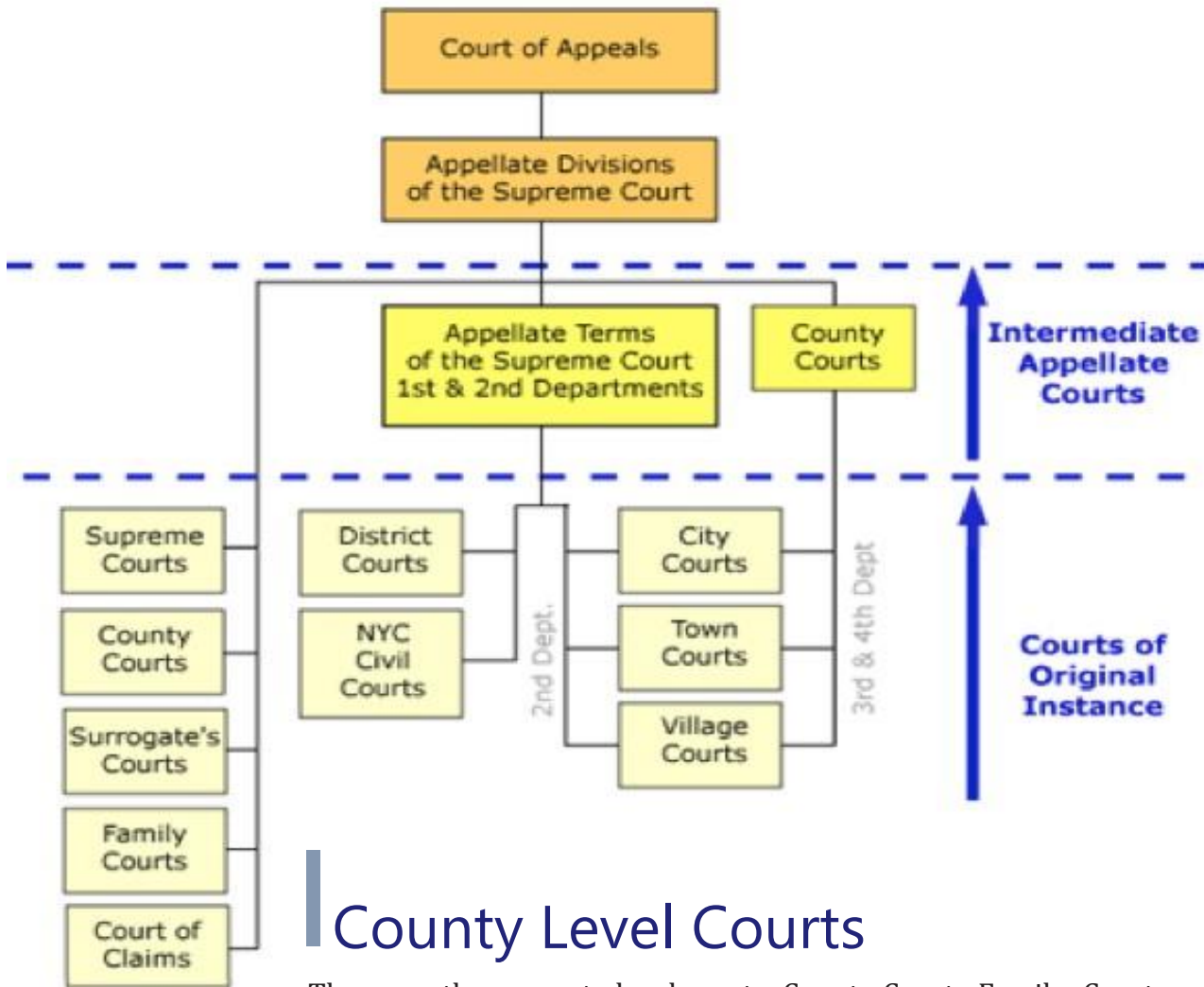
### Trial Courts

#### State Supreme Court

Onondaga County is in the fifth judicial district, fourth department of the state Supreme Court. The fifth district also includes Oswego, Jefferson, Lewis, Oneida, and Herkimer counties. The Supreme Court in New York State is the trial court of original, unlimited jurisdiction and hears cases, including civil matters, involving amounts of money beyond the jurisdiction of the lower courts. It also hears all divorce, separation, and annulment proceedings. Voters in the judicial district elect judges for 14-year terms. There are 18 Supreme Court justices in the six county districts.

#### Court of Claims

Judges of the Court of Claims are appointed by the Governor with the consent of the New York State Senate. They hear all claims against the State of New York. There are no juries in these proceedings.



## County Level Courts

There are three county level courts: County Court, Family Court, and Surrogate's Court. County Court has jurisdiction over criminal cases and civil cases up to \$25,000. Family Court handles neglect and abuse cases, support proceedings for spouses and children, adoptions, paternity suits, family offenses, custody and visitation, and matters relating to PINS (persons-in-need-of-supervision) and juvenile delinquents. PINS are defined as children aged 7 through 15 who are ungovernable at home or are habitual truants. A juvenile delinquent is a child under 16 who commits an act that would be a crime if committed by an adult. Surrogate's Court admits wills to probate, administers estates, and appoints guardianships.

Judges for each of the county courts are elected by county voters for a 10-year term to a specific court: county, family, or surrogate. Sessions in the courts are public, except in family court where, to protect young people, spectators may not attend without the judge's consent. Each court has a clerk of the court and a court stenographer who records verbatim minutes of testimony in all court sessions in Onondaga County. Only a small fraction of the testimony is actually transcribed.

## City Court

Syracuse has three divisions: Civil, Criminal, and Traffic. The Civil Division handles civil proceedings up to \$15,000 and oversees Small Claims Court and Commercial Small Claims Court up to \$3,000. Criminal proceedings (including most misdemeanors and below) are handled by the Criminal Division. Traffic Court handles traffic violations and infractions. Judges are elected by city voters to serve a 10-year term and are required to be lawyers. There are also three separate city courts including community treatment, and domestic violence courts for handling those specialized issues.

## Town and Village Courts

Justice courts (formerly known as Justice of the Peace Courts) may hear civil cases up to \$3,000 and minor offenses. There are mandated uniform jurisdiction, practices, and procedures for these courts established by the 1967 Uniform Justice Court Act. Judges of these courts are elected by town and village voters and need not meet any special qualifications other than residence within the town or village. Those who are not lawyers are required to complete a special training course. There is one or more justice in each town and village in the county.

## Juries

There are two types of juries that function in Onondaga County. The grand jury serves on a countywide basis and is composed of between 16 and 23 members. The appellate division fixes its term. It determines whether an indictment shall be returned in cases of serious offenses and may initiate an investigation into matters of public concern. All felonies must proceed by indictment; all other crimes may proceed by either indictment or information.

The trial or petit jury is usually composed of 12 members in criminal cases and six members in civil cases, although the number of petit jurors may vary in Supreme Court.

Both grand and petit jurors are paid for on a per diem rate and receive expenses for transportation. Both types of jurors in Onondaga County are selected to serve in all of the county's courts.

A juror must:

- be a United States Citizen;
- be a county resident at least 18 years old;
- be free of any past felony conviction;
- be able to understand and communicate in English;
- not have served on a jury within the past four years or within the past two years in counties where the four-year period has been found impractical.

Citizens may volunteer for jury duty at the office of the Commissioner of Jurors.

In 1995, a new law greatly limited juror exemptions. The only people disqualified outright from jury service are state and federal judges. The law also allows a potential juror to be excused or have his or her service postponed for good reason, as determined by the court.

Under the previous law, practicing attorneys, dentists, physicians, nurses, pharmacists, optometrists, psychologists, police and fire fighters, sole proprietors, embalmers, people age 70 and older, and parents or guardians of children under the age of 16 whose principal responsibility was the daily care of that child could request exemption from jury service.

## District Attorney's Office

The district attorney (DA) is elected for a four-year term. To hold this office he/she must be an attorney, a resident of Onondaga County, and a qualified voter. The district attorney is the chief law enforcement officer in the county and is charged with the responsibility for prosecution of all crimes within the county and with the supervision of the presentation of cases to the grand juries. The major portion of the district attorney's salary is paid by the county with a fourth being paid by the state.

## Client Protection

The New York Lawyers' Fund for Client Protection provides safety for clients who undergo losses due to negligence or malpractice by a lawyer. If an attorney misuses money or property the client must also report the loss to an Attorney Disciplinary Committee and to the local district attorney. Complaints must be filed within two years of the client discovering their loss, and are eligible for up to a maximum of \$300,000 for each loss. Additional information regarding a client's rights and responsibilities can be obtained from The New York Lawyers' Fund for Client Protection.



The John H. Mulroy Civic Center, *FOCUS Photo*

## Related Services

The Probation Department is responsible for supervising both juveniles and adults on probation. The detention of juvenile delinquents is under the jurisdiction of the Onondaga County Probation Department. Juvenile delinquents may be housed in the secure detention facility at Hillbrook Detention Home pending the disposition of their cases or they may be placed in non-secure group homes or foster homes. The Family Court may order detention and decides whether the detention is to be secure or non-secure.

Onondaga County's Probation Department also administers the Juvenile Justice program to support children and their families while deterring problematic behaviors in children without court involvement. Formally PINS (Person in Need of Supervision), the Juvenile Justice program serves children under 18 who are habitually truant from school, and/or uncontrollable in various environments. Law requires the County to provide an avenue for parents and schools to programs and services in a timely manner to address juvenile behavior.

Legal Services of Central New York, a not-for-profit antipoverty program, provides free legal services to poor, elderly, and disabled people in Onondaga County. It assists with civil matters such as landlord-tenant problems, public housing eligibility, discrimination in housing, welfare eligibility, family law, and disability. Courts in this state have the power to assign defense

counsel to adults unable to afford the services of private attorneys. Those unable to obtain counsel are entitled to have legal representation at every stage of the criminal process and also in certain Family Court proceedings (e.g., custody, neglect/abuse, paternity). To meet this requirement, Onondaga County contracts with the Onondaga County Bar Association and the Assigned Counsel Program, a non-profit corporation which assigns private attorneys to represent indigent clients. Additionally, Hiscock Legal Aid Society represents indigent defendants in Syracuse City Court and in appeals from other courts to the Appellate Division, 4<sup>th</sup> Dept. Under state law, all assigned lawyers are paid from county funds.

Family Court also assigns lawyers ("Law Guardians") to represent children in abuse or neglect, PINS and delinquency cases. Both Family and Supreme Courts may assign law guardians to children of custody and visitation matters. The fee schedule for all assigned lawyers is set by the state.

The Citizen Review Board (CRB) was established in Syracuse to ensure an open citizen-controlled process for reviewing grievances involving members of the Syracuse Police Department. The CRB works to enforce accountability over the powers exercised by SPD officers, preserve the integrity of SPD, and create a forum for citizen complaints regarding members of the SPD to be heard impartially.

# Health & Mental Health Services

## Chapter Eleven

### Health

In New York, state law regulates health services. The New York State Department of Health sets standards and procedures through Sanitary Code and Hospital Code. It also provides local health departments with consultation services and state/federal funding. Locally, the counties regulate health care services in their borders.

In Onondaga County, the Health Department was established as an agency of the county government in 1967. The Health Department operates in accordance with the Onondaga County Sanitary Code, the County Charter, the Code of Procedure, and other local law. The county executive appoints the commissioner of health for a four-year term. The local policies of the department are determined by the county legislature and the Health Advisory Board. In 2021, the Onondaga County Health Department (OCHD) had an \$81.26-million budget with a 234 person staff.<sup>44</sup>



Syracuse Community Health Center -East

The mission of Onondaga County Health Department is to “protect and improve the health of all Onondaga County residents”.<sup>45</sup> The department does this by offering numerous health care programs and services for county residents that promote health, prevent diseases, prepare public health, and assure a safe and healthy environment. Numerous other services are provided by OCHD including:

- *Community Health* which works to prevent diseases and promote health for all county residents. It focuses on health issues such as chronic diseases, tobacco/vaping use, cancer screenings, suicide, and substance abuse.<sup>46</sup>
- *Environmental Health* which works to ensure a safe and healthy environment for people to live, work, and play. It does this by inspecting homes for lead, investigating animal bites, and protecting the county’s air/drinking water.<sup>47</sup>
- *Family Health and Safety* in which the programs focus on reproductive health care and social services to those in need of family planning assistance.<sup>48</sup> Services in this program include childbearing education, immunizations, and counseling.
- *Family Planning Services* including pregnancy, STD, and HIV testing and consulting.
- *Forensic Sciences* including the Forensic Laboratories comprised of five disciplines: Digital Evidence, Firearms, Forensic Chemistry, Forensic Biology/DNA, and Latent Prints.<sup>49</sup>
- *Pregnancy/Early Childhood Services* include early intervention, home visits, immunizations, and special education services.

## Planning of Health Services

In 2011 the Central New York Health Systems Agency (CNYHSA), an independent, not-for-profit corporation responsible for health system planning in Central New York merged into HealtheConnections Health Planning.<sup>50</sup> HealtheConnections connects healthcare providers, insurers, businesses, and consumers to implement services and initiative that support New York State's health information exchange, electronic health records, and population health improvement agendas. It is responsible for gathering data and planning for the allocation of health care resources and the maintenance and enhancement of the health care system in the Central New York region.

## Mental Health

The Onondaga County Department of Mental Health (OCDMH) was formed in 1961 under the County Charter. OCDMH is regulated and funded by the New York State Office of Mental Health (OMH), Substance Abuse (OAS), and People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD).

The County Executive appoints the Director of Services for Mental Hygiene Services. As of 2021, the Department of Children and Family Services oversees all Mental Hygiene Services including Mental Health, Substance Abuse, and Developmental Challenges. This change consolidated the Divisions of Children and Adult Mental Health Services into a new Division of Mental Health Services for Children, Families, and Adults.

OCDMH defines mental health as “having a meaningful and productive life-having a life worth living”.<sup>51</sup> The mission of OCDMH is to

enable those citizens of Onondaga County that have a mental illness, cognitive impairment, or chemical dependency to achieve their maximum potential. To do this, they have developed four methods of treatment.

1. Assisted Outpatient Treatment (AOT): For patients who have serious mental illnesses and a history of lack of compliance with treatment. These patients could also be receiving treatment through a court order.
2. Single Point of Access (SPOA): For patients with serious mental illnesses aiming to identify, screen, and refer around 1,000 patients to proper care each year.
3. Dual Recovery: For patients that can do person-centered care alongside special projects and mental training.
4. Peer Engagement: For patients who have experienced a drug overdose in a medical setting. They work with hospital workers and support groups to build relationships and identify personal obstacles that have prevented previous recovery efforts to be successful.

The department is divided into contracted and direct services. Contracted services include mental health, developmental disability, and chemical dependency. The direct services of the OCDMH include correctional and behavioral health services, children's clinic, children's day treatment, student assistance program, and assisted outpatient treatment. OCDMH also engages in projects to promote the well-being of their residents. An example of this is the SHARP (Senior Health and Resource Partnership) project. SHARP's goal is to “assist adults, 55 years of age and older, with counseling and community-based services that promote physical and emotional well-being”.<sup>52</sup> The project is a partnership between Onondaga County Department of Adult & Long-Term Care Services funded by New York State Office of Mental Health.

## Chapter Twelve

The Onondaga County Department of Social Services was established by the consolidation of city and town social welfare programs in 1938. In 2014, Onondaga County created the Department of Social Services – Economic Security (DSS-ES) during a health and human services reorganization effort. The Commissioner of the DSS-ES is appointed by the County Executive. The Commissioner’s office is responsible for the overall administration of the department and the services it provides.

The New York State Office of Temporary Assistance and Disability, Office of Child and Family Services, and Department of Health oversee county social services. These state offices set functions and policies for county departments. Adherence to state and federal standards ensures financial support from state and federal sources.

Services provided by these offices in Onondaga County include:

### - Child Support Services -

Child Support Services is a federal and state mandated program enacted to ensure that children are supported by their parents. The mission is to locate absent parents and ensure financial support necessary for the child’s well-being.<sup>53</sup>

### - Day Care Services -

Day Care Service assistance is available to those leaving Family Assistance and those employed with low income. There is no base income qualification. Families are expected to pay a portion of the childcare expenses, but the amount varies by individual case.<sup>54</sup>

### - Emergency Assistance for Adults (EAA) -

Emergency Assistance for Adults is available to any adult (18+) who is experiencing a financial crisis beyond their control. Instances of eligibility include stolen Social Security Disability (SSI) checks, damage due to catastrophe, and emergency moves (including eviction). Eligibility is determined by individual case.<sup>55</sup>

### - Fair Hearings -

Fair Hearings offers any individual questioning an eligibility decision in any public benefit program the right to a fair hearing. New York State administrative judges preside over the process. Hearings can be requested in Onondaga County by an online request form, a mail or fax printable request form, and request by telephone.<sup>56</sup>

### - Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) -

Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) is a federally funded energy assistance program to assist low-income households with energy costs. HEAP sends payments to beneficiaries’ energy providers to be deducted from their bills. Eligibility is based on income and housing situation.<sup>57</sup>

### - Medicaid -

Medicaid is a form of public health insurance that can be used to pay medical, hospital, and nursing care expenses. Eligibility is determined by income and resource standards governing Public Health Insurance Programs unless you are a Supplemental Security Income (SSI) recipient. SSI recipients are automatically eligible for Medicaid.<sup>58</sup>



## - Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) -

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program's (SNAP) mission is to reduce hunger and malnutrition among members of low-income households. It does this by providing food stamps for nutritious food to recipients. Eligibility is based on household income.<sup>59</sup>

## - Temporary Assistance (TA) -

Temporary Assistance (TA) provides cash assistance. It aims to offer temporary help for individuals and families in need while they work toward self-sufficiency. Programs and services include Family Assistance, Safety Net Assistance, and Emergency Temporary Assistance. An individual can receive up to 60 months of TA in their lifetime and qualification is determined after meeting with a DSS-ES eligibility worker.<sup>60</sup>

## - Fraud Investigations -

The Fraud Investigation Unit at Social Services-Economic Security investigates all reported allegations of fraud in the Temporary Assistance, SNAP, Medicaid, HEAP, and Day Care programs. This unit does not investigate Social Security, Disability, Workers Compensation, Unemployment or Section 8.

# Child and Family Services

The Onondaga County Department of Children and Family Services is responsible for providing social services to children living in Onondaga County, in accordance with existing federal and state laws. Operationally, services are provided through the five divisions of the department:

## - Child Welfare -

Child Welfare is responsible for investigating allegations of child abuse, neglect, and maltreatment. When cases of abuse, neglect, or maltreatment arise the Department of Child and Family Services ensures the risks to the child's safety are marginalized and work to stabilize the family environment. Services range from in-home preventative social services to foster care and adoptions.<sup>61</sup>

## - Juvenile Justice-

The Juvenile Justice Unit works with youth ages 7-15 who are truant or engaged in runaway, ungovernable, or delinquent behaviors. The unit operates both community-based diversion services as well as the Hillbrook Detention Center and Non-Secure Detention Services.

## - School-based Initiatives -

To ensure the well-being of children in the County, the Department of Child and Family Services integrates community support and services into the schools in Onondaga County. In the school setting it works to address social, economic, health, and emotional/-behavioral challenges. The goal is to intervene early and provide support to students in need.<sup>62</sup>

## - Youth Bureau -

The Syracuse/Onondaga County Youth Bureau's overarching mission is the development of a community rich in service, opportunity, and support for youth under 21 and their family. The bureau believes that all youth deserve to live in a healthy and supportive environment. This environment is facilitated by a collaborative community effort to provide stable services and activities. The bureau relies heavily on community feedback and adjusts to their concerns.

# Planning and Development

## Chapter Thirteen

Planning and development are concerned with the use of land and natural resources to best meet the needs of people. These needs include houses, factories, communities, highways, airports, water, open space, parks, and natural beauty. Other planned land uses may include the more agricultural needs of cropland, pasture, range, woodlands, wetlands, and wildlife areas.

Many agencies at all levels of government are involved in planning and development: municipal planning agencies, highway departments, parks, and recreation departments, as well as private groups. This section deals with planning agencies at the state, regional, county, city, town, and village government levels. The plans developed by these agencies are only advisory; they are used to inform the adoption of new laws through zoning ordinances or regulations adopted by the legislative body. Only city, town, or village governments may pass zoning ordinances.

### Planning

The function of governmental planning is to provide guidelines for the physical, social, and economic development of the community. Planning should be a continuous process, although in practice the time and expense involved in drawing up complete plans results in a time lag between growth and the changes that take place in a community. To be effective, planning should come first followed by zoning and development according to an accepted plan. Historically, however, zoning ordinances have often occurred first, based on existing land uses.

New York State authorizes a local government to set up a planning board or commission of local citizens (who need not be technically trained at the time of their appointment) to advise the local legislative body on community development. The board may employ a professional planning staff. Since 2007, NYS law has required members of planning boards and zoning boards of appeals to complete at least four hours of training each year.

Planning boards are authorized by state law to prepare a comprehensive master plan, which is an official statement of policy on future growth and development of the community. It includes population growth, housing, transportation, commercial and industrial development, education, recreation, municipal services, and methods of financing. Most towns and villages have a comprehensive master plan or are developing such plans. The towns of Clay, Spafford, and Otisco and the Villages of Fabius and Minoa have not adopted a plan.

Most towns and villages in Onondaga County have adopted a master plan to be used as a guideline in planning and zoning decisions. The county also has a 2024-2029 Capital Improvement Plan adopted by the Onondaga County Legislature. Although a master plan is not binding, the actions of a planning board, in theory, should fit the framework of the master plan.

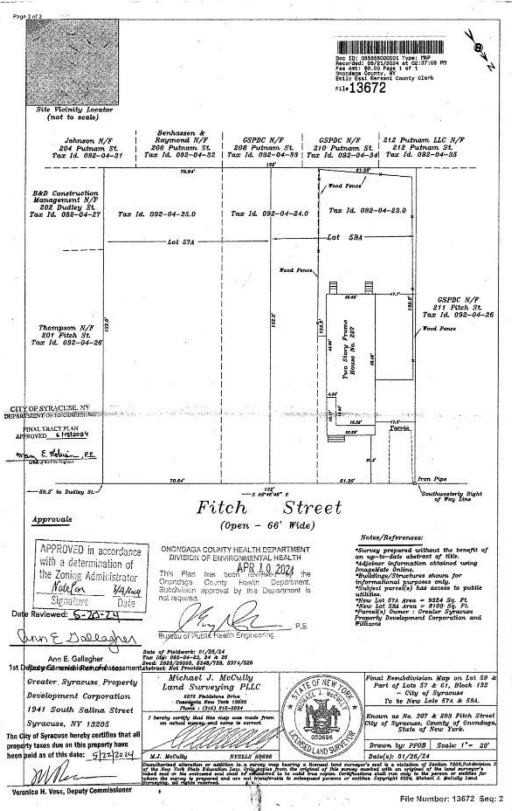
### Town and Village Planning

Most towns and villages in Onondaga County have planning boards, although town board members in a small town may perform this function. Typically, expert advice is provided by municipal engineers and building inspectors, and other staff and consultants may be hired to provide expertise. Planning boards typically have either five or seven members appointed by the town board or village mayor pursuant to local law. Planning boards usually meet once a month or as needed. Board members may be paid a small stipend by their municipalities, but many are unpaid.

A town board may, but does not have to, authorize the planning board to approve or disapprove subdivision plats (plans/maps filed with the County Clerk to show the legal boundaries of individual parcels of land, and measurements and features found therein. see Figure 13.1). Additionally, the county or city may review certain subdivisions.

Figure 13.1

Example of subdivision plats, Onondaga County, NY



Source: Onondaga County Clerk's Office, 2024

# City Planning Department

Established in 2010, the Syracuse Department of Planning and Sustainability is a division of the City of Syracuse Department of Neighborhood and Business Development and is responsible for major planning and urban design projects, and for planning and executing sustainability initiatives of the Mayor.

In 2014, City planning staff successfully pursued the adoption of the City's Comprehensive Plan 2040, which creates long-term, comprehensive goals to guide future operating budgets and Capital Improvement Programs in addition to departmental operations, City regulations, and other regional plans and funding decisions.

# County Planning Board

The Onondaga County Planning Board (OCPB) consists of seven members. The County Executive appoints five members, who are then confirmed by the Onondaga County Legislature, for up to two three-year terms. In addition, there are two ex-officio voting members: the Onondaga County Comptroller and the Commissioner of the Onondaga County Department of Transportation. The Secretary to the Board is the Onondaga County Department of Planning Director. Operating under NYS General Municipal Law 239, the OCPB advises local boards on the potential impact of local land use decisions on a countywide and inter-municipal level. By utilizing the County's comprehensive plan, the OCPB provides guidance on municipal land use referrals and evaluates the proposed Onondaga County Capital Improvement Program. The OCPB typically deals with projects from over 100 different boards and handles more than 500 referrals annually. The types of projects and locations vary:

- Adoption or amendment of comprehensive plan
- Adoption or amendment of a zoning ordinance or local law pertaining to zoning or subdivisions
- Issuance of special use permits
- Approval of site plans
- Granting of use or area variances

# City Planning Commission

Members of the Syracuse Planning Commission are appointed by the mayor and serve for five years. They must be city residents, and no more than three members can belong to the same political party. They are responsible for creating a comprehensive development plan for the city. They make recommendations to the Mayor and Common Council, over zoning issues such as proposed changes to new streets, prepare a comprehensive zoning plan, zoning ordinance, and official zoning map, and make decisions on subdivisions.

- Other authorizations which a referring body may issue under the provisions of any zoning ordinance or local law
- Approval of preliminary and/or final subdivision plats or proposal to develop an undeveloped plat

Project Locations within 500 feet of:

- City, village, or town boundary
- Existing or proposed County or State park, parkway, road, or public land
- Existing or proposed Stream or drainage channel owned by the County
- Existing or proposed boundary of any county or state owned land with a public building or institution
- Right-of-way of any existing or proposed county or state parkway, thruway, expressway, road or highway
- Farm operation in an agricultural district

## County Planning Department

The Onondaga County Department of Planning provides a variety of planning services for the county, as well as the City of Syracuse and the 19 towns and 15 villages in the area. The department's work aligns with the County Executive's initiatives on Poverty, Infrastructure, and Economic Development. They are responsible for developing and maintaining a comprehensive plan for the county, which is currently Plan Onondaga (PLANON). The department administers various programs and planning efforts to support these objectives.

## Zoning Regulations

While planning occurs in all levels of government, the adoption and enforcement of zoning regulations are within the jurisdiction of city, town, and village governments. The purposes of zoning, as listed in the state enabling legislation, include the promotion of public health, safety,

morals, and the general welfare of the community.

By law, zoning regulations must be made in accordance with a comprehensive plan or, in the case of a city, with "a well-considered plan."<sup>63</sup>

Governments often partially zone new developments as they grow on the outskirts of cities and villages. Towns are not empowered to zone for villages within their boundaries. Zoning regulations vary widely from one municipality to another and can conflict with each other.

Town and village planning boards must submit certain proposed zoning actions to the county planning board which then has 30 days to review the proposed actions and make recommendations.

If the county planning board does not act within 30 days and does not respond to the municipality before the referring board is ready to vote on the proposal, the referring board may act without the agency's response.

If the county planning board disapproves a proposed zoning action or recommends modification, the municipal body can overrule the county's recommendations by a vote of a majority plus one. It must also adopt a resolution setting forth the reasons for the contrary action and must file a report of its final action with the County Planning Board.

## Zoning Commissions

The town or village legislative body appoints a zoning commission to draw up zoning regulations. The commission is a temporary board but may become the planning commission once the zoning ordinance is accepted. If a planning commission already exists, it is often appointed to act as the zoning commission. Towns and villages must hold public hearings before passing zoning ordinances. Enforcement of zoning ordinances is the responsibility of a local building inspector or enforcement officer.

## Zoning Board of Appeals

In addition to Planning Boards, most municipalities also have a separate Board of Zoning Appeals, usually 3-5 members in size. The primary function of a BZA is to hear requests for variances or requests to vary from the area or use requirements outlined in the municipality zoning ordinance. Towns, villages, and cities that have adopted a zoning ordinance must establish a Zoning Board of Appeals. The board may grant variances to the zoning law. It also interprets the intent of the zoning ordinances in special cases, since all contingencies cannot be written into the zoning ordinances. The board may also grant permits for special uses, such as gravel excavation, trailers, and golf courses. The City of Syracuse and most towns and villages have zoning boards, with the number of members ranging from three to five (seven in cities under certain circumstances). As of 2024, the City of Syracuse has a board of six members.

Members are appointed by the city mayor, town, or village boards, sometimes on recommendations from the chief executive officer. Members are usually unpaid and meet only as required to hold a hearing. Their meetings must be advertised and open to the public. If a decision is challenged by an aggrieved party, their decisions are subject to review by the courts.

State law establishes the authority of zoning boards. A town board appoints the members of the zoning board for three- or five-year terms and may remove a member for cause only after public hearings. Other than appointive powers, city, town, and village governments have no direct control over the zoning board of appeals.

## Building Codes

The state has a model building code that has been adopted in local ordinances by the city and many towns and villages. Several municipalities have developed their own building codes and property maintenance codes.

These codes give detailed technical specifications for materials and methods of building and provide for fire and sanitary safety.

Zoning ordinances, on the other hand, are concerned with site control and land use. Zoning ordinances and building codes may occasionally overlap or conflict.

Enforcement of the building code depends on periodic inspection of construction in progress as well as approval of initial plans. The City of Syracuse Department of Neighborhood and Business Development enforces the building code in the city through the Division of Code Enforcement. In towns and villages, enforcement of building codes is the responsibility of the local building inspector or code enforcement officer as prescribed by local ordinance. Towns and villages in Onondaga County employ a building inspector or code enforcement officer, but most are not full-time. Adequate review and inspection may not be achieved without strong citizen interest and support.

## Other Planning Related Agencies

The legal division of the NYS Department of State often aids in the interpretation of state planning laws, in training local planning officials, and in recommending revisions to state planning laws. The NYS Department of State receives copies of all new zoning and subdivision ordinances passed in the state and is a resource for municipalities seeking help in writing new local planning.

The Legislative Commission on Rural Resources proposes legislation to revise statutes for state land use. The Commission is assisted in this effort by the NYS Land Advisory Board who hold regional workshops and submit draft bills for consideration by the commission and the state legislature.

The Central New York Regional Planning and Development Board consists of five participating counties: Cayuga, Cortland, Madison, Onondaga, and Oswego. A board of directors is selected by the five member counties. The board hires a team of professional planners and other administrative staff funded by contributions from member counties, state and federal grants, and contract service revenue. They offer a wide variety of services to support growth and development in Central New York, focusing on eight key program areas that include economic development, environmental management, community development, energy management, land use and transportation planning, information and research services, and intergovernmental coordination.

The Onondaga County Planning Federation (OCPF) is a non-profit organization that supports all local municipalities in Onondaga County. They conduct yearly training conferences for elected and appointed officials as well as the general public. The federation also offers valuable planning data and information to its members. The Onondaga County Department of Planning provides administrative support to the OCPF. The main objectives include encouraging community and inter-community planning among Onondaga County municipalities, educating federation members and the public, gathering and sharing planning information and resources, and fostering collaboration and coordination among federal, state, county, and local authorities on relevant matters.

The Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC) is responsible for multi-agency transportation planning and funding coordination for Onondaga County. The Department of Planning Director and staff participate on the SMTC Planning, Policy, and Capital Improvement committees, and represent the county on the Executive Committee. Staff also request studies on behalf of the 35 municipalities in the county and participate on study and advisory committees.

## Development

Development serves to translate policy into practice, acting as the bridge between planning and tangible outcomes. It involves the intricate process of transforming land and resources to best serve various purposes, such as residential, commercial, industrial, recreational, and public uses. While planning focuses on creating policies, guidelines, and strategies for growth and land use, development is the phase where these plans are realized through concrete projects and programs. Development translates theoretical frameworks into physical manifestations, ensuring that envisioned concepts are implemented on the ground, often requiring collaboration across multiple sectors including government, private industry, and community.

Development projects play a critical role in stimulating economic growth. They lead to the construction of new housing, commercial facilities, and infrastructure, which are essential for meeting the basic needs of a growing population. By generating jobs and attracting investments, these projects contribute to economic vitality and community prosperity. Additionally, well-planned development can enhance quality of life by creating spaces that are not only functional but also accessible.

However, development is not without its challenges. Environmental issues such as climate change, urban sprawl, and depletion of resources can complicate the development process. To address these concerns, development practices increasingly aim to minimize human impact and promote sustainability. This includes implementing green building practices, designing walkable and bike-friendly streets, and preserving natural resources and open spaces. Such efforts ensure that development is balanced with environmental stewardship, fostering a harmonious relationship between urban growth and ecological preservation.

## Infrastructure Improvements

The Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG) was created and receives funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). This initiative allocates yearly grants based on a specific formula to states, cities, and counties with the goal of creating sustainable communities. The Program aims to include offering adequate housing and livable surroundings, as well as broadening economic prospects, especially for individuals with low to moderate incomes.

Under the program guidelines, Entitlement communities are populations of at least 200,000 (excluding the population of entitled cities) County, as an urban county, is considered an entitlement community. These communities have the authority to develop their own programs and funding priorities. However, they must prioritize activities that benefit low-and moderate-income individuals.

Additionally, grantees may fund activities for urgent community development needs when existing conditions pose a serious and immediate threat to the health or welfare of the community, and no other financial resources are available to meet such needs.

HUD determines the amount of annual funding allocation for each entitlement grantee using a formula that considers community needs such as poverty extent, population, housing overcrowding, age of housing, and population growth lag.

Grantees are required to use not less than 70% of CDBG funds for activities benefiting low-and moderate-income persons over a 1, 2, or 3-year period, as selected by the grantee. HUD does not provide CDBG assistance directly to individuals,

businesses, non-profit organizations, or other non-governmental entities.

Grantees must create and implement a detailed plan that facilitates citizen participation, with a focus on involvement from individuals with low or moderate incomes where CDBG funds will be used.

The plan must:

- Provide citizens with reasonable and timely access to local meetings, information, and records related to the grantee's proposed and actual use of funds
- Provide for public hearings to obtain citizen views and to respond to proposals and questions at all stages of the community development program, including at least the development of needs, the review of proposed activities, and review of program performance
- Provide for timely written answers to written complaints and grievances
- Identify how the needs of non-English speaking residents will be met in the case of public hearings where a significant number of non-English speaking residents can be reasonably expected to participate

The City of Syracuse and the 34 towns and villages in the county participate in the CDBG program; however, the Town of Clay's situation is unique. Clay exceeded the minimum population threshold of 50,000 for participation in the CDBG program, thereby qualifying to receive its own annual grant, much like the City of Syracuse.<sup>64</sup>

In 2009 the CDBG was funded by the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA), which was created to provide affordable housing, stimulate economic growth, and create jobs. The same year, Syracuse received \$1.7 million, Onondaga County, \$586,000, and the Town of Clay, \$78,000 in funding.

Since then, Syracuse and Onondaga County remain entitlement communities and CDBG funding to both has increased. In 2023, the City of Syracuse received just over \$4.9 million and Onondaga County received \$2.2 million in CDBG funding.<sup>66</sup>

It is worth noting that the American Rescue Plan (ARP) funding that emerged as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic was its own, separate funding and did not pool with or increase CDBG funding.

Approximately 50 percent of the CDBG grant is spent on capital projects in towns and villages. Eligible activities include public works projects such as construction of water lines, drainage, and sanitary sewers; central business district improvements such as sidewalks, curbing, landscaping, benches, and lighting; reconstruction of roads; improvements to neighborhood facilities such as community centers, senior centers, and libraries; park improvements, sewer studies, accessibility improvements, clearance, and demolition for low-income housing; and provision of enriched housing opportunities for the elderly who can no longer care for themselves in their own homes. Typical target areas have been Mattydale, East Syracuse, Solvay, Baldwinsville, Bridgeport, Jordan, Memphis, and Warners.

In summary, the intricacies between planning and development underscore the critical role each plays in shaping the future of our communities. Planning establishes the framework by setting out policies and guidelines that address the needs and aspirations of a growing population, while development turns these plans into reality through tangible projects and infrastructure.

The collaboration between various governmental levels and private entities ensures that both immediate and long-term goals are met, balancing growth with sustainability. By adhering to comprehensive master plans and zoning regulations, communities can navigate the complexities of development, striving for progress while maintaining a commitment to environmental stewardship and quality of life. Looking forward, the continued evolution of planning and development practices will be crucial in addressing emerging challenges. As communities face issues such as climate change, resource depletion, and rapid urbanization, the integration of innovative and sustainable practices will be essential. The role of planning agencies, development projects, and regulatory frameworks will remain pivotal in guiding this transition, ensuring that growth is managed responsibly and that future developments are both beneficial and resilient. Through ongoing collaboration, education, and adaptive strategies, communities can effectively navigate the dynamic landscape of planning and development, creating environments that are both prosperous and sustainable for generations to come.





# Parks and Recreation

## Chapter Fourteen

### Parks and Recreation

Local governments in Onondaga County have varying responsibilities for providing parks and recreational facilities and programs. All levels of government and volunteer agencies are involved to some degree.

### State and Federal Governments

New York State provides both state park lands and funds to local communities to develop their own parks and recreation programs. In Onondaga County, two major parks are administered by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation – Central Region: Green Lakes State Park and Clark Reservation State Park. The state also oversees a 36-mile linear park along the Old Erie Canal from DeWitt to Rome, NY.



Onondaga County Parks photo

The central region of New York State parks offers a full range of recreational opportunities year-round including boat launches, beaches, camping, and a variety of winter sports. Also included is the operation of six historic sites.

Federal and state funds for recreation and conservation come to state and local governments, non-governmental agencies, organizations, and individuals in the form of grants-in-aid, technical assistance and loans.

### Onondaga County

A diverse system of over 6,000 acres of parks and historic sites are administered by the Onondaga County Department of Parks and Recreation. Led by a professionally certified commissioner; the department's organizational structure focuses on recreation and public programs, planning and development, natural resources, and operations and maintenance. Policy and budgetary issues are decided in liaison with the Environmental Conservation and Parks Committee of the county legislature.

Onondaga Lake, Rosamond Gifford Zoo, and Beaver Lake Nature Center are the cornerstones of a year-round operation. Also featured are Carpenter's Brook Fish Hatchery, three forest parks, NBT Bank Stadium, two beaches, Skä•noñh Great Law of Peace Center, the Salt Museum, a softball complex, two cemeteries, and several historic sites and memorials.

Hundreds of special events and programs, including Golden Harvest Festival, Lights on the Lake and Jamesville Balloon Fest, take place throughout the year enhancing the quality of life for residents and



### Onondaga County Parks photo

attracting visitors from throughout the Northeast and beyond. In addition, Onondaga County Parks hosts various regional sporting events such as Ironman 70.3, Irongirl Triathlon and the Empire State Marathon annually.

Features of the park system include the East Shore Recreation Trail at Onondaga Lake Park with bike and skate rentals; boat launch and marina and the scenic West Shore Trail. Cross-country ski trails, youth group camping, horseback riding and sleighrides at Highland Forest. Nearly 400 outdoor programs, nature walks and wellness activities, including cross-country skiing and snowshoeing happen at Beaver Lake. While dozens of reserved picnic areas and several banquet facilities can be found throughout the system.

Organized “Friends” groups support the parks operations and help cover a portion of the costs associated with running sites like Rosamond Gifford Zoo and Beaver Lake Nature Center. Onondaga County parks attract nearly 3 million visitors each year. Opened in 2015, the county’s lakeview amphitheater on the shores of Onondaga Lake hosts a variety of concerts and performances each year.

## City of Syracuse

The City of Syracuse offers city residents year-round active and passive recreational opportunities. The city of Syracuse has approximately 172 municipally-owned and maintained parks, fields, inactive cemeteries, medians/ traffic islands (most of which are landscaped and contribute to neighborhood green space), and natural areas. The city also operates two golf courses and three winter ice-rinks, including one in the center of downtown in Clinton Square.

A parks commissioner, appointed by the mayor, administers the department, and is advised by a parks and recreation committee of the Syracuse Common Council. In addition to athletic and aquatic programs, the department offers arts and crafts for all ages from preschoolers to senior citizens. Band concerts, holiday programs and Dancing Under the Stars are annual events while neighborhood facilities make recreational activities available in all areas of the city.

The responsibilities of the department cover such diverse areas as dog control, an Adopt-A-Lot Program and an entertainment series. The department also assists many neighborhood and community recreation organizations.

## Towns and Villages

The towns and villages vary widely in the recreational opportunities they support for their residents. Some provide financial support or park land but rely on volunteer community recreation councils to organize any recreation programs. A few have made recreation a town or village responsibility and have a recreation commission and paid professional director. In many towns and villages, community recreation councils plan and organize such activities as summer swimming and playground programs, baseball, softball, ice-skating, and basketball. Membership for these councils is drawn from other community organizations; often, village and town government, school district, community council, and other voluntary agencies cooperate to provide recreational activities and facilities.

# Public Safety

## Chapter Fifteen

### Fire Protection

Professional firefighters staff city of Syracuse fire departments. Towns and villages have either all-volunteer or a combination of volunteer and paid firefighters. New York State and Onondaga County provide training at local fire stations as well as at the Public Safety Training Center at Onondaga Community College (OCC), a component of the college's Division of Continuing Education. In addition to providing training, the county government, through the Onondaga County Department of Emergency Management Fire Bureau, maintains a hazardous materials response team, fire investigation unit, and Juvenile Firesetters program. The director of the fire bureau enforces and administers the New York State Uniform Fire Prevention and Building Code in county-owned or operated facilities.



Source: Syracuse Fire Department

### Onondaga County

The director of the Onondaga County Department of Emergency Management Fire Bureau oversees mutual aid and training in Onondaga County. Mutual aid reciprocal agreements are established for personnel and equipment between county fire departments. Central dispatching through the county's emergency center triangulates this function.

Mutual aid also provides staff services that would normally be found within the framework of a large municipal fire department to smaller departments outside the city.

Training includes administration of the New York State Office of Fire Prevention and Control field fire training program, and the funding of the National Fire Protection Association compliant-training at OCC, the Public Safety Institute and instruction at individual fire departments by members of the fire coordinator's staff.

Onondaga County has a staff of New York State certified fire investigators, available upon request to any fire department. Between 100 to 200 fire investigations are conducted each year.

Fires determined to be incendiary (intentional) are pursued by a police agency and the district attorney’s office. In the case of juvenile fire setters, a joint city/county program is funded through the fire coordinator’s office to provide intervention services. Access to the program is through the Volunteer Center Helpline.

The county’s Hazardous Materials Response Group is a cooperative effort among six fire departments, the county health department and the office of emergency management. It is directed by two deputy fire coordinators and provides technicians trained to remove hazardous materials or otherwise protect against them. The team is available upon request of the local fire department.

Fire prevention for all county facilities (more than 250 buildings) is the responsibility of the fire coordinator. A code enforcement officer inspects all areas of public assembly, ensures compliance with the code for all new construction and renovations and makes other fire inspections as deemed necessary.

All Emergency Medical Service (EMS) training and coordination is done through the county EMS Bureau, now a unit of the Department of Emergency Management.

Specialists in advanced life support (ALS) can provide emergency care in the field under direct physician supervision through the county’s radio network. Eastern Paramedics provide primary ALS in the city and immediate suburbs. Through cooperative agreements among all ambulances and fire departments, ALS is available throughout the county and is dispatched immediately when dictated by initial information received at the 911 center.

## City of Syracuse

Over 373 firefighters serve in Syracuse’s Fire Department. The mayor appoints the fire chief. Under the city charter, the fire department is responsible for fighting fires, investigating the causes of fires, and enforcing the fire prevention code. Daily in-service training is provided for firefighters.

The Syracuse Fire Department was reorganized between 1972 and 1977. There are currently 11 fire stations in the city, compared to 18 in 1969.<sup>67</sup> The department maintains a rescue squad and hazardous materials response unit.

The city also has an automatic mutual aid arrangement for fire calls to the Van Duyn Home, Community General Hospital, Bristol-Myers Squibb, and Crouse-Hinds.

Table 15.1  
City of Syracuse

Fire/EMS Dispatch Data

YEAR	*TOTAL	% of CHANGE
2018	21,209	+2.1%
2019	21,430	+1.0%
2020	15,927	-29.5%
2021	21,858	+31.4%
2022	24,402	+11.64

Source: 2022 Department of Emergency Communications Annual Report

The fire department also hosts a fire prevention program that includes code enforcement; in-service inspections of residences and businesses; fire awareness programs in homes, schools, and by request; fire prevention activities; and dissemination of information, i.e., at the New York State Fair.

Most fire department personnel are selected and promoted based on the results of their civil service exam scores. Retirement plans are provided through the city by the New York State Police and Fire Retirement System.

In 2022, the city fire department answered over 24,000 alarms. Fire/EMS dispatches to the fire department dropped in recent years in response to changes in the medical calls the fire department responds to.

## Towns and Villages

Outside the city of Syracuse, fire protection is provided through special fire protection districts. Like school districts, these districts may cross county lines, town, and/or village borders. All the 19 towns receive fire protection through these districts.

There are three types of fire districts. The first is a municipal corporation that has the legal power to borrow money and collect taxes. These districts obtain funding from real estate taxes and fundraising activities. The second type of fire district is a private corporation, a nonprofit entity that contracts with a town to provide fire protection. It has no independent authority to assume debt. The department elects officers and is responsible for the budget. The town provides revenue for the department by adding a fire tax to all property tax bills. The third type of district is a village department, with the fire department serving as an arm of the village government.

As of 2017 there are 58 fire departments serving residents in Onondaga County. That number could decrease as some departments have discussed mergers with some nearby departments or increase as populations within municipalities increase. Some districts sponsor more than one

fire department. Some towns and villages are protected by part-volunteer and part-paid departments. Anywhere from one to eight fire departments can provide protection in each town with the average being three. Not all villages in the country support village fire departments.

Some village fire departments may serve areas outside the village through arrangements with the town government. Each town contracts for protection individually with its fire district(s), resulting in significant variation in tax rates.

Fire protection in the towns and villages of the county also depends on several paid fire agencies. Hancock Airport has a crash rescue/fire service which is not part of the Syracuse Fire Department. The Air National Guard also has a paid fire service composed entirely of its own members.

Most large industrial organizations and plants, such as Carrier Corporation, have their own fire brigades. Brigade members usually function in other capacities but are trained as fire fighters. Some large companies also have their own fire equipment.

## Police Protection

Traditionally, the job of law enforcement has been the responsibility of local police forces. In Onondaga County, police protection is provided by 20 governments, including the state, county, city, some towns, and most villages.

Table 15.2

2022 Emergency Call Volumes in Onondaga County

### Answered 911 Calls by Source

Source	2022 Incoming	2022 Percent of Calls by Source
Wire-line	18,570	3.87%
Wireless	295,859	61.66%
VoIP	35,125	7.32%
10-digit	90,349	18.83%
Information Line	16,806	3.50%
Abandoned Calls	23,134	4.82%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>504,571</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: 2022 Department of Emergency Communications annual report

## New York State's Role

State government's role in criminal justice concentrates on the New York State Prison System, the Parole Board, and the State Police. Two troops of the New York State Police operate within the boundaries of Onondaga County. One troop patrols the Thruway while the other polices other state highways and county areas where few local police services exist. State Police not

patrolling the Thruway serve Onondaga County residents from stations in Elbridge, Cicero, Lafayette, and Radisson. State Police work within the city only at the order of the governor or the request of the mayor. The State Police operate a scientific laboratory, a pistol permit bureau, and a communications bureau in Albany.

State law sets regulations governing the local police. It requires that local police personnel of town, village, and city governments come under state civil service. It also stipulates that all new police officers and supervisory personnel attend training at the special regional Police Academy at Onondaga Community College.

Table 15.3

2022 Police Dispatches in Onondaga County

Department	#DR's
Baldwinsville Police	6,987
Camillus Police	17,648
Cicero Police	25,490
Dept of Environmental Conservation	7
Dewitt Police	35,881
ESF Police	154
Geddes Police	16,899
Jordan Police	715
Liverpool Police	7,651
Manlius Police	23,872
Marcellus Police	726
New York State Police	28,494
North Syracuse Police	12,989
OCC Public Safety	485
Onondaga Co Park Rangers	2,552
Onondaga Co Sheriff's	95,354
New York State Parks Police	176
Skaneateles Police	2,589
Solvay Police	9,389
Syracuse Police	174,226
SU Public Safety	61,027
Upstate Police	828
<b>Total</b>	<b>524,139</b>

## County

The Onondaga County Sheriff's Office is the chief law enforcement agency of county government. The office consists of three departments; Civil/Administrative, Custody (county jail), and Police. The 2024 adopted budget is an estimated \$120 million.<sup>89</sup>

The department has 750 personnel.<sup>68</sup> The sheriff, who is an elected official, appoints employees to all positions from Civil Service examination lists, and all new appointees must attend the police, custody, civil, or courts training academy. The only exceptions to Civil Service rules are the Undersheriff, three Department Chief's, and the sheriff's executive secretary.

The Onondaga County Sheriff's Office primarily patrols areas of the county outside the city of Syracuse. It has three community police stations in the towns of Onondaga, Salina and Clay, and several micro stations at various locations.

The sheriff's police department is comprised of the following components: Patrol and Criminal Investigations divisions, Abused Persons Unit, Records and Special Enforcement sections (includes helicopter pilots and observers, divers, boat patrols, and snowmobile patrols), Canine, Traffic and Community Response units, Community Relations Section officers, Crime Prevention deputies, School Resource Officers, SWAT, and the Explosive Disposal Unit.

The sheriff's office, city police, State Police, and town and village police agencies use the Onondaga County Department of Emergency Communications (911) as the centralized communication center. The 911 center is responsible for receiving and dispatching all emergency calls and communications. This county department has an oversight board consisting of representatives from all participating police, fire, and EMS agencies and has been a model for public safety communication centers around the United States.

The sheriff's office staffs the Justice Center, the county's maximum security holding facility, which is used by all law enforcement agencies in the county as well as state and federal agencies. In 2010, there were 10,949 inmates received at the Justice Center.<sup>70</sup> The facility utilizes the 'podular' direct supervision design, which has a custody division deputy directly responsible for 60 inmates within a given pod. The population is separated by four categories: male, female, adult, and minor. Youth under 16 years of age are incarcerated at the Hillbrook Juvenile Detention Center operated by the county Probation Department. Patients with mental illnesses are confined in a Behavioral Health Unit supervised by both custody division deputies and Correctional Medical Care, Inc. (CMC) by contract. An infirmary with staff from CMC also provides for inmates convalescing, limiting the need for hospital details by custody division staff. Persons are held in the Justice Center only until trial, and if found guilty, are then transferred to the New York State Department of Corrections, the Onondaga County Correctional Facility at Jamesville, or to a federal prison.

The Sheriff's police division participates in Operation Impact with deputies patrolling the city of Syracuse alongside State Police and Syracuse Police Department officers. They also participate in numerous State and Federal Task Forces.

## City of Syracuse

The Syracuse Police Department, a New York State accredited police agency, is under the command of a chief of Police appointed by the mayor, a first deputy chief and three deputy chiefs, who are appointed by the police chief. The department employs approximately 400 police officers and over 100 civilian personnel.

The mission of the Syracuse Police Department is to protect the lives and property of all who live, visit, and work within the city of Syracuse, to prevent crime, to detect and arrest offenders, to facilitate the movement of people and vehicles, to preserve the public peace, to identify problems that have the potential for being more serious problems

for the individual citizen, to create and maintain a feeling of security in the community, and to enforce all federal, state, and local laws over which the department has jurisdiction.

Police employees must meet physical requirements, pass a Civil Service examination, and have a high school diploma for appointment. Promotion through the ranks for police officers is determined by civil service examinations, length of employment, and review by the police Chief. The training division is responsible for basic police recruit training as well as coordinating in-service training to all sworn personnel.

The uniformed bureau is the largest bureau within the department; over half of all city police officers are currently assigned here. There are several specialized divisions recently created within the uniform bureau that respond to the needs of specific city neighborhoods. The directed patrol division and the community policing division work closely with community leaders and neighborhood residents to coordinate and provide community-oriented police services to blighted areas. These efforts have been so successful that the New York State Bureau of Municipal Police Training has incorporated the community policing strategies developed by the Syracuse Police Department in a statewide community police-training program.

The investigations bureau is responsible for the continuation of felony investigations initiated by the uniform bureau as well as confidential narcotics and vice investigations. This bureau also contains the crime laboratory, which is one of only six full service crime laboratories in New York State. It is staffed exclusively by city police officers and civilian personnel. The special investigations division conducts undercover narcotics and vice operations and participates in several countywide and regional drug trafficking enforcement efforts.

The department is involved in youth programs such as traffic and bicycle safety, DARE, Officer Friendly, Scout Explorer Post #70, internships, job shadowing, and Career Day. Other programs include, but are not limited to: Neighborhood Watch, Operation Safeguard, involvement with senior citizens with staff from the Metropolitan Commission on Aging, and the STOP DWI Program.

## Towns and Villages

The towns and villages of the county vary widely in the type of police protection they provide.

Five of the 19 towns have police departments: Cicero, Camillus, DeWitt, Geddes and Manlius. Eight of the 15 villages have departments. The villages that do not have departments are Tully, Fabius, Minoa. Upstate Medical University, SUNY ESF, and OCC also have their own police departments.

In 2008, the town of Clay merged its police force with the Onondaga County Sheriff's Office in an effort to control expenses.<sup>72</sup> This merger reflects a growing trend of government service consolidation in the county and the state.

While the jurisdiction dictates who has the primary presence on a scene, backup comes from other areas throughout the county (and sometimes from other counties) as needed.

All towns and villages require Civil Service examinations for the position of police chief, but some require only a certain level of education and/or experience. For example, the villages of Baldwinsville and Marcellus require a college degree. All towns and villages require Civil Service examinations for police officers and may require experience and/or special training. All have medical requirements. Some have investigators and youth officers. Salaries vary widely.

## Metropolitan Progress

For several decades there has been a definite move toward centralization of certain police functions within the county in order to reduce overlapping of services that increase costs and decrease efficiency. The 911 Center is a prime example of this cooperation, plus the regional crime lab, Criminal History Arrest / Incident Reporting Services (CHAIRS) shared computer information system, and the city/county Abused Persons Unit. Syracuse no longer has a helicopter and shares this service with the county. Town and village police departments have also been upgraded and modernized during the past 10 years.



# 61 Water Supply

## Chapter Sixteen

The water supply of Onondaga County is provided by numerous local lakes and delivered by multiple public services. These public services are subject to strict federal, state, and local laws that ensure high quality standards and environmental protection measures are met.

The development of Onondaga County's water system stretches back to efforts in the late 1800s to provide the area, particularly the City of Syracuse, with a reliable, clean water supply. Historical construction and development reflected the growing demand for water in Onondaga County. In recent years, usage and demand for water has declined in the county due to the loss of customers and conservation measures.

Currently, residents of Onondaga County are primarily served by three main sources of water: Onondaga County Water Authority (OCWA), the Syracuse Department of Water (SDW), and wells operated by private residences. Both OCWA and SDW have a complex relationship that ensures the water needs of all connected buildings can be met, especially in times of water shortages. Residents relying on well water are responsible for maintaining their own water standards and are independent from public water systems.

In 2018, OCWA delivered on average 37.59 million gallons per day to customers in five counties, mainly sourced from Lake Ontario and Otisco Lake, with a small percentage being purchased from SDW.<sup>73</sup> In 2019, SDW delivered on average 39.08 million gallons per day, sourced primarily from Skaneateles Lake and Lake Ontario, the latter of which was purchased from OCWA.<sup>74</sup>

### Role of the State

Water quality standards are set by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). The DEC regulates surface waters, setting standards for safe water levels and withdrawal

limits for sources. The DEC grants permits to public water suppliers who must develop a water conservation program to obtain a permit.

Drinking water standards are set by the New York State Department of Health (DOH). These standards can be more, but not less stringent than standards set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Public water suppliers, such as OCWA and SDW, must test their water according to schedules and guidelines set by the DOH. The DOH also approves watershed rules and regulations, which public water suppliers may use to protect their supplies.



OCWA photo

## Water Suppliers

The Onondaga County Water Authority (OCWA) sources, treats, and supplies water for a five county region in Central New York. Since OCWA acts as an emergency back-up to the Syracuse Department of Water, the Authority supplies approximately 90 percent of Onondaga County residents living outside of the City of Syracuse with water.<sup>75</sup> The remaining 10 percent of residents get their water from local municipal wells in the villages of Baldwinsville, East Syracuse, Marcellus, Tully and Pompey, private community systems, or their individual wells.

Prior to its 2017 merger with the OCWA, the Metropolitan Water Board (MWB) was an Onondaga County-run board responsible for operating several pipelines that supplied water to the OCWA as a utility wholesaler. The MWB did not sell directly to any retail customers. The merger follows the trend of recent efforts to consolidate county services across New York State. The MWB was once the administrative body of the Onondaga County Water District, which serves municipal corporations and public authorities. Lake Ontario water distributed by OCWA and Syracuse was treated and supplied by MWB.

The Syracuse Department of Water (SDW) is responsible for sourcing and distributing water from Skaneateles Lake to customers within the City of Syracuse. The high-quality water from Skaneateles Lake does not require filtration, but SDW is responsible preventing contamination, and maintaining both quality standards and acceptable water levels for the lake.

Approximately 5 to 8 percent of households in Onondaga County receive their water from private wells.<sup>76</sup> Since individual wells are not connected to the public water system, county water suppliers do not track or monitor these wells.

## Onondaga County Water Authority (OCWA)

In 2018, OCWA delivered over 37 million gallons of water per day through more than 700 miles of pipelines to over 30 points of delivery.<sup>77</sup> The authority sold to more than 340,000 residential customers in five counties: Onondaga, Oswego, Madison, Oneida, and Cayuga.

OCWA sources approximately 17 million gallons of water per day from Otisco Lake, comprising 46 percent of its supply. 19 million gallons per day, approximately 50 percent, of OCWA's water was sourced from Lake Ontario. The remaining water was purchased from the City of Syracuse to supply customers south and west of the City.

In general, the OCWA water lines distribute water from Otisco Lake to the towns of Camillus, Geddes, Marcellus, Onondaga, and parts of Salina, Dewitt, and the village of North Syracuse. It also distributes Lake Ontario water to the towns of Cicero, Clay, Lysander, Manlius, Pompey, Van Buren, and parts of Salina, Dewitt, and North Syracuse.

## OCWA Historic Expansion

The OCWA, a public benefit corporation, was created in 1951 by the New York State Legislature. The county's 34 water employees in the MWB were incorporated into OCWA, which had over 140 employees in 2017.

The authority acquired the water rights to Otisco Lake through condemnation of a water company in 1955. The system had been developed early in the century by private enterprise to provide water to Solvay Process and the New York Central Railroad.

After acquiring the system, OCWA expanded and modernized the facilities and now can deliver 20 million gallons of water a day from Otisco Lake by gravity. Over half of the water distributed by OCWA comes from Lake Ontario and is transmitted through the OCWA's mains. A filtration plant for the Lake Ontario water supply was built in 1967.

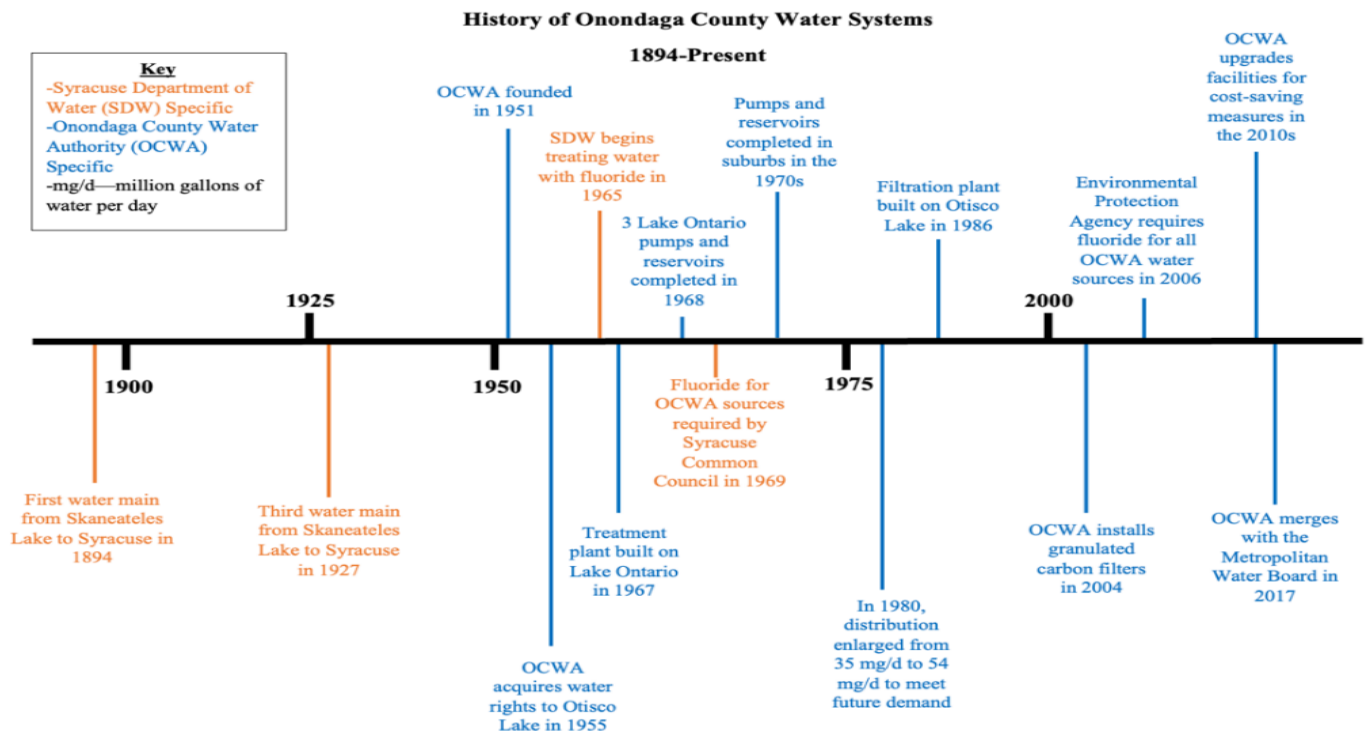
The OCWA provides water to the Onondaga County Water District, which includes the areas of Onondaga County containing OCWA customers. The district comprises the entire area of the county except for the City of Syracuse, and the towns of Skaneateles and Spafford, which were excluded based on their claim that they would not benefit from the improvement.

Onondaga County's district was established after a public referendum in 1962 authorizing a \$45 million bond issue to construct a supply and distribution system from Lake Ontario at Oswego.<sup>78</sup> The system became operational in June 1967.

Three pumping stations were completed and operational by the end of 1968-- the Lake Ontario Water Treatment Plant at Oswego, two 30-million-gallon reservoirs (Terminal Reservoir in Clay and Eastern Reservoir in Manlius), the Alexander F. Jones Administration Center, and about 55 miles of large diameter pipelines in Onondaga and Oswego counties.

In subsequent years, a 100-million-gallon reservoir in the town of Van Buren was constructed, as well as a pumping station on Seventh North Street, pumping and small storage facilities south of Syracuse, and in the Manlius-Pompey area. Additional pipeline was also extended to various areas of Onondaga County. An additional \$10 million authorization was approved for the expansion of the water system in 1976.

In 1980, the supply capacity of the distribution system was increased from 36 million gallons per day to approximately 54 million gallons per day so that future demand can be met. In 1986, OCWA built a filtration plant for the Otisco Lake water supply.



## Finance

The OCWA, as a public benefit corporation, does not have the ability to tax and can only raise revenues for its projects through the sale of services to customers. However, the county received \$3.7 million from New York State during the MWB merger.

The Onondaga County Water District is financed in two ways: by benefit assessment on all real estate within the district and by water sales. For equitable benefit assessments, the district is divided into two geographical zones with different rates set for each—one including Onondaga County and Oswego County customers, and the other including all other customers.<sup>79</sup> The amount that must be raised by assessment is determined by district expenses and revenues generated by water sales. Currently water sales support all operational costs and therefore, the debt service for the construction of the system is paid by benefit assessments.

## Filtration and Treatment

As of 2006, the EPA required all surface water supplies to be filtered, including OCWA's supplies from Lake Ontario and Otisco Lake. Additionally, because of an act passed by the Syracuse Common Council in 1969, Lake Ontario and Otisco Lake water has been fluoridated. Syracuse's supply of water has been treated with sodium fluoride since 1965. All communities using public water systems in Onondaga County now have fluoridated water supplies.

## Syracuse Department of Water

The City of Syracuse oversees the distribution of water from Skaneateles Lake to supply the needs of the city. During 2019, the total amount of water entering the City of Syracuse water system was 12.778 billion gallons per year, all from Skaneateles Lake.<sup>80</sup> Water flows through three conduits that run from Skaneateles Lake to Syracuse. The first was laid in 1894, the third in 1927.

City water lines distribute water from Skaneateles Lake to the village of Skaneateles and several water districts in the town of Skaneateles, a few customers in the villages of Elbridge and Jordan, the City of Syracuse, parts of DeWitt, and two districts in the town of Onondaga. The water supplied to these last two districts is water supplied by OCWA from Lake Ontario.

The state DOH has given the City of Syracuse an exemption to avoid the filtration requirements on their water supply from Skaneateles Lake due to high water quality and watershed protection measurements. This exemption is conditional, meaning it can be revoked if the City does not uphold its protection measures.

## Relationship with OCWA

The SDW and OCWA maintain a cooperative relationship, with OCWA acting as a backup for SDW in times of emergencies. Regulations limit the amount of water that may be drawn from SDW's main source: Skaneateles Lake. If the needs of the City should exceed the maximum amount allowed, the City has arrangements to purchase additional water from OCWA.

The amount from OCWA may increase in times of drought if Skaneateles Lake water levels decline. This occurred in 2005 when increased summer demand raised the average daily withdrawal from Lake Ontario to more than 26 million gallons a day. This amount is well within the state DEC permit, which limits withdrawal to 62.5 million gallons per day.

OCWA is also a regular customer of SDW. In 2018, approximately 1.2 million gallons per day or 3.2 percent of OCWA's water came from Skaneateles Lake water purchased from the City of Syracuse Department of Water through various supply connections. This water is distributed to OCWA customers living close to the city border, specifically those living in the Nedrow, Southwood, and Jamesville areas.

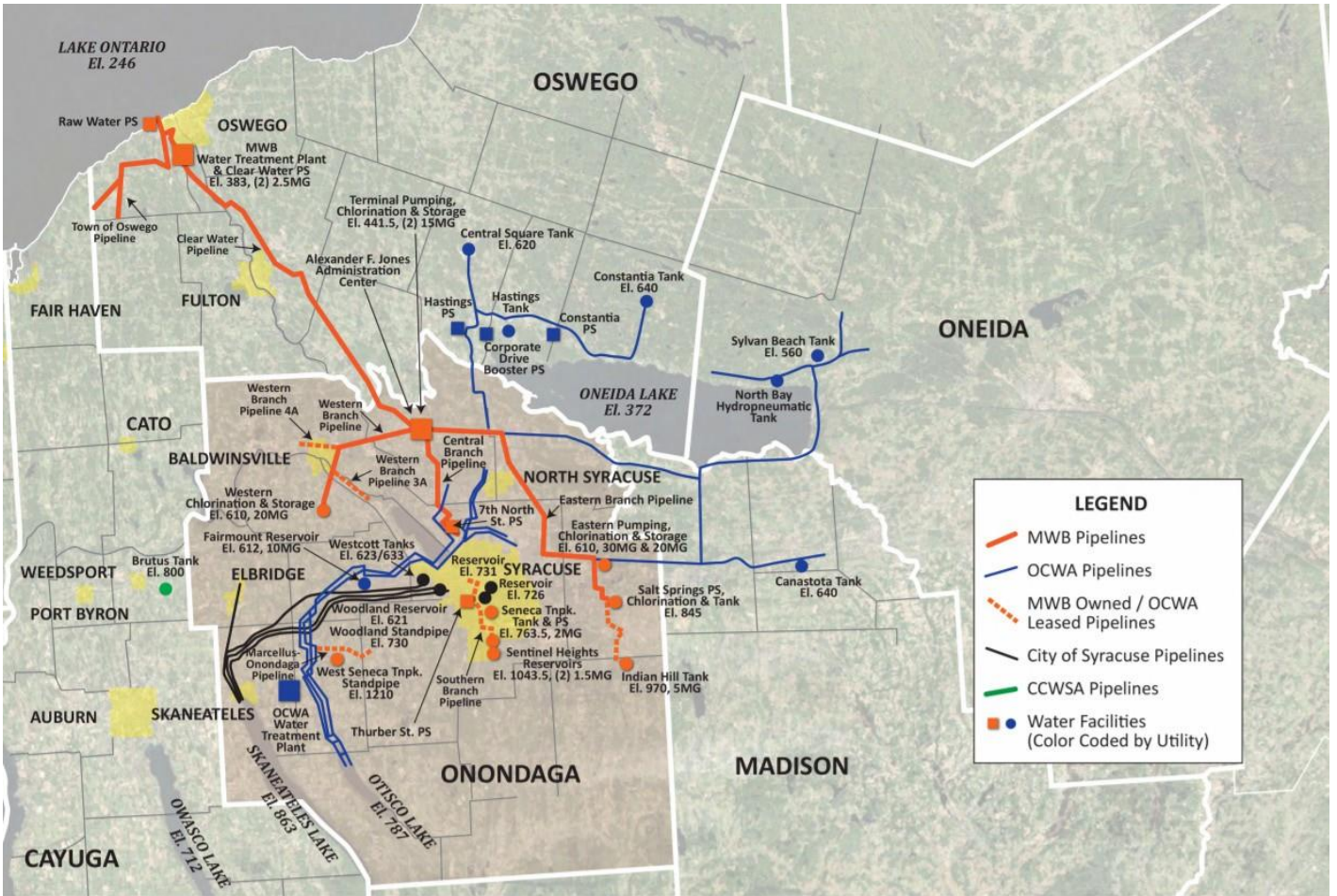
## Treatment, Quality Assurance, & Conservation

Trained water treatment plant staff continues to achieve the highest quality water that is possible. The most important contributor to attaining this objective is having a high-quality source. The MWB collected water quality data that exceeds the scope of regulated parameters for 30 years. Now, the OCWA stays ahead of developing regulations by analyzing the water for contaminants as soon as they are identified as potentially harmful. The water that supplies Onondaga County has been confirmed to be of excellent quality. The treatment processes further improve the quality through coagulation, filtration, fluoridation, and disinfection.

In 2004, a granular activated carbon filtration system was implemented and continues to operate. It proves to be an effective technique in removing naturally occurring organic compounds that can cause undesirable tastes and odors in drinking water. Water treatment plant improvements started in 2010 allow for OCWA to maximize use of its lowest cost source of water supply.

The last few decades have seen overall water consumption drop in Onondaga County and the City of Syracuse. In 2006, OCWA delivered 42.31 million gallons per day compared to 37.59 million gallons per day in 2018—a drop of over 8 percent. In 2006, the City of Syracuse consumed 54 million gallons per day from Skaneateles Lake compared to 39 million gallons per day in 2019—a drop of 28 percent.<sup>81</sup> This is largely due to the implementation of water conservation measures, such as federal regulations regarding showerhead and toilet water consumption, and a stagnating/slightly decreasing population.

Figure 16.1  
Onondaga County Water Distribution



Source: Metropolitan Water Board, 2017

# Waste Control

## Chapter Seventeen

### Sewage Disposal State and Federal Role

Standards regulating the discharge of pollutants into state surface and ground waters are determined by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). The standards for water quality are outlined in amendments to the Federal Water Pollution Control Act of 1972 the Clean Water Act of 1977, as well as Article 17 of the New York State Environmental Conservation Law. Based on these laws, municipal treatment facilities have been required to achieve secondary treatment since 1977. Most of the treatment plants in the county have consistently achieved secondary or advanced levels of treatment.

PL 92-500 included provisions to provide 75

percent federal aid to municipalities for the construction of wastewater facilities. The 1972 Environmental Quality Bond Act provided funds for New York State to award 12.5 percent grants to municipalities.<sup>82</sup>

The Federal Water Quality Act of 1987 phased out the federal grants program and replaced it with a "State Revolving Fund" (SRF) loan program.<sup>83</sup> The New York State Revolving Fund program is currently administered by the New York State Environmental Facilities Corporation (EFC), a public benefit corporation. Interest-free short-term loans as well as low interest rate long-term loans to municipalities are available to finance planning, design, and construction of water pollution control facilities. As the loans are repaid by the municipalities, the money is re-distributed by the state to other municipalities. In addition to the SRF, various grant and loan programs for wastewater pollution control projects



Metropolitan Wastewater Treatment Facility. Photo Source: FOCUS

are available from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Rural Development Agency (RDA), and the Farmers Home Administration (FMHA).

In Onondaga County, most of the major treatment plants and other wastewater treatment appurtenances were constructed during the 1970's and 1980's. However, with the promise of Micron's chip manufacturing operation, it is worth noting that Micron has made vows to construct a private wastewater treatment facility to protect the local water system from potential pollutants so the full burden does not fall on county's Oak Orchard site.

The majority of recent wastewater projects have been constructed with local funds. Some select grant monies have been received from the Amended Consent Judgment projects. Since the cessation of the federal Construction Grants Program, the county has financed dozens of projects under the State Revolving Fund program.

## Local Government Role

Several different levels of local government share the responsibility for the collection, treatment, and disposal of sewage in most of the county's urbanized areas. The county provides and maintains all major trunk sewer lines and treatment plants, while the towns and villages provide lateral connecting sewers. Individual building or subdivision contractors provide sewer lines from homes and buildings to the lateral lines. The city's sewage, collected in the city's system, is treated, and disposed of at facilities operated by the county. Onondaga County's services are provided through the Onondaga County Sanitary District and are the responsibility of the Onondaga County Department of Water Environment Protection (WEP). The district was consolidated in 1979 and replaced 24 sanitary districts and two sewage treatment plant districts.





The WEP commissioner can propose an expansion of the county sanitary district. After a public hearing for the affected property owners, the recommendation is sent to the county legislature where it is considered by the Public Works Committee and full legislature. If approved, the county legislature expands the district after another public hearing.

Within the county district, small districts provide lateral sewers between homes and the county trunk lines. These districts are organized and administered by town boards and are called town sewer districts. They may be proposed by a town board or more commonly by a petition of property owners. Unlike the county sanitary district, the formation of town sewer districts may be blocked by a majority vote of the property owners within the proposed district. Outside the area presently served by the county sanitary district, sewage facilities may or may not be available. Most villages maintain their own sewers, but few of them maintain and operate sewage treatment facilities. Villages that have treatment facilities must achieve the standards of at least secondary treatment levels. There are currently four village sewage collection and treatment systems in Onondaga County (separate from WEP facilities): Minoa, Marcellus, Skaneateles, and Tully. Other communities outside the county sanitary district are currently serviced by individual residence on-site wastewater treatment systems.

The majority of villages requested inclusion in regional treatment plant service areas within the county sanitary district. Baldwinsville, for example, is one of the many villages connected to the regional facilities.

## Refuse Collection and Disposal Solid Waste Collection

Historically, New York State gave the responsibility for the disposal of trash to the local government. In the mid-1970s, 15 local landfills were operated by municipalities in Onondaga County. Gradually, these landfills were closed by state DEC because of the advent of stringent rules and regulations governing the construction and operation of landfills.

## Onondaga County Resource Recovery Agency

Following the closing of city landfills, the Onondaga County Resource Recovery Agency (OCRRA) was established in 1990. A public benefit corporation, OCRRA was created at the request of the Onondaga County Legislature by the New York State Legislature to handle the responsibility for municipal solid waste in Onondaga County.

Through the county's most recent 2016 Comprehensive Solid Waste Plan, agreements were signed with 33 of the County's 35 municipalities, giving Onondaga County responsibility for providing a range of solid waste services and facilities to meet the solid waste management needs of these communities. In turn, the municipalities pledged to have all municipal solid waste delivered to the OCRRA facilities for processing and handling through what is called contractual flow control. In 1990, the county government assigned these contracts to OCRRA for implementation.

A 12-member board of directors oversees the operation of the trash agency. The volunteer directors are appointed by the county executive (four appointees), the City of Syracuse (three appointees), the chair of the Onondaga County Legislature (three appointees), and the towns of Van Buren and Onondaga (one appointee each). Members' terms are three years; they are eligible to serve no more than two consecutive terms.

## Solid Waste Disposal

OCRRA's management of trash follows the NYSDEC's hierarchy as described in the state's Solid Waste Management Plan: *Beyond Waste* of 2010. The agency has waste reduction and recycling programs to decrease the amount of trash thrown away, a waste-to-energy plant to reduce the volume of non-recyclable trash by 90 percent through combustion into energy, and burial of the ash in an NYSDEC-permitted landfill. The agency administers the county's Source Separation Law ('Operation Separation') which mandates recycling for homes and businesses.

Onondaga County has a 95 percent participation rate and reduces the amount of material that needs to be landfilled by 90%. Onondaga County residents and businesses have recycled over twelve million tons of mandatory and voluntary items since 1990. The Onondaga County Legislature also banned yard waste from the trash in 1992. Each year, over 30,000 county residents use OCRRA's two yard waste compost sites, located in Jamesville and Amboy (in the town of Camillus). For a one-time seasonal fee of \$25, homeowners in OCRRA's service area can drop off grass clippings, compost, leaves, and brush up to 10 inches in diameter. Residents can also pick up mulch and compost for their gardens.

The 990 ton/day waste-to-energy facility on Rock Cut Road in the town of Onondaga is operated by Covanta Energy through a contract with OCRRA, opened in 1994. The plant's NYSDEC permit allows the burning of 361,350 tons of solid waste annually.

Other programs operated by OCRRA include a construction debris processing operation at the Ley Creek Transfer Station, a delivery point for trash from households and small users at the Rock Cut Road Transfer Station, household hazardous waste events, information campaigns, and a household battery collection.

## Delivery of Trash

Delivery of trash to the OCRRA system occurs through a dozen private trash haulers and eight public haulers. The public haulers are the city of Syracuse DPW and several villages, both units of government that provide a wider level of services to their residents than towns. Besides Syracuse, the villages of Camillus, East Syracuse, Manlius, Minoa, Fayetteville, Liverpool, and Solvay operate trash pick-up services through their highway or public works departments. Some towns and villages contract with private haulers to provide collections. Among these are the towns of Geddes, Clay, Dewitt, Manlius, Cicero Camillus, and Salina as well as the villages of Elbridge, Jordan, North Syracuse, and Marcellus.

In the remaining towns and villages of the county, residents arrange for trash removal by private haulers. The only exception is the town of Spafford where residents can deliver trash to the town transfer station. From there the trash is delivered to the disposal system operated by OCRRA. Towns that allow private haulers to complete trash pick-up require the haulers to have local permits to operate. One condition of these permits requires any hauler who collects trash within its area to deliver all trash into the OCRRA system and to provide a recycling collection to its customers.

Table 17.1  
WEP Plant Descriptions 2024

	<b>Areas Served</b>	<b>Treatment</b>
Metropolitan Syracuse (Metro)	The Metropolitan Syracuse Wastewater Treatment Plant (Metro) provides high-quality treatment for 270,000 people and many industrial and commercial customers in the City of Syracuse and some areas outside the city in Onondaga County.	Metro treats an average of 84 million gallons per day. Full secondary and tertiary treatment can be provided for up to 126 million daily gallons. Metro has a total hydraulic capacity of 240 million gallons per day during wet-weather events such as rainstorms.
Baldwinsville-Seneca Knolls	23 pump stations in Baldwinsville, Radisson, Seneca Knolls, Interstate Island, and River Mall serving 36,000 residents.	Flexible design allows for activated sludge operation in either single or two-stage mode. The current mode is a single stage with the second stage used for polishing. Pure oxygen is generated onsite and used in the first-stage aeration basins and aerobic digester. Total phosphorus is removed year-round, while disinfection and nitrification are employed seasonally according to permit.
Brewerton	Portions of the Town of Cicero; along the Southwest edge of Oneida Lake, beginning just west of the Hamlet of Bridgeport, up to and including the Village of Brewerton.	Provides advanced secondary treatment of wastewater using either Extended Aeration or Contact Stabilization Activated Sludge Processes, currently operated using the Extended Aeration process.
Meadowbrook-Limestone	Towns of Dewitt and Manlius; along with smaller portions of the Town of Pompey and the City of Syracuse	Secondary treatment of wastewater using an Extended Aeration Activated Sludge Process.
Oak Orchard	Significant sections of the Town of Clay and portions of the Town of Cicero; along with the Village of North Syracuse	Pure oxygen-activated sludge plant. Pure oxygen aeration is generated on-site by pressure swing absorption.
Wetzel Road	Wastewater is collected throughout portions of the Towns of Salina and Clay via a series of gravity sewers and small pump stations	Provides advanced secondary treatment of wastewater using a Biological Aerated Filter (BAF) System and tertiary treatment with Cloth Media Disk Filters (CMDf)

Source: Onondaga County Department of Water Environment Protection

# Transportation

## Chapter Eighteen

### Streets, Roads, and Highways

All levels of government are involved in providing for streets and roads in Onondaga County. The federal government (through the U.S. Department of Transportation and its Federal Highway Administration) assists all states with money for highway planning, design, and construction, including safety projects. Roads are built and maintained by state, county, and town governments. Streets are built and maintained by the city and the villages. The towns, while maintaining the town roads within their borders, require private developers to build new roads to specification before turning them over to the town. The units of government involved with road maintenance contract with each other to provide snow removal and ice control in parts of their respective road systems.

### State and Interstate Highways

The design, construction, and maintenance of state highways in Onondaga County is the responsibility of the New York State Department of Transportation, Region 3, which has its headquarters in Syracuse.

There are 480 miles of state highway in Onondaga County. Designated Routes 81, 90, 481, and 690 all run through Onondaga County. Interstate 90, known as the New York State (Thomas E. Dewey) Thruway, is a toll road operated and maintained by the New York State Thruway Authority. State highway crews service and maintain the other interstate highways and most state highways, except for certain areas where the work is done by various local governments under contract with the state. For example, snow and ice control on state highways in Onondaga County may be cleared by the Onondaga County Department of Transportation under contract with the state. The county, in turn, may choose to subcontract part of the work on certain county highways to town and village highway departments.

Since 1969, the federal government, reinforced by state policy, has required public hearings at the planning and design stages of state and interstate highway construction. The hearings allow local governments and other interested parties to participate in decisions involving the use of land for highways. The federal highway program provides 90 percent of the land and construction costs of interstate highways. The remaining 10 percent is paid by the state government, which also bears the entire cost of maintaining interstate routes.

Portions of I-81 are nearing the end of their lifespan. As of 2024, there is a comprehensive \$2.25 billion plan approved by the NYS DOT and local government to tear down the I-81 viaduct and replace the structure with a community grid. Some funding comes from the U.S. Department of Transportation's (USDOT) Neighborhood Access and Equity Program allocating \$180 million and a NYS Grant to Salt City Constructors in the sum of nearly \$220 million. Other funding is coming from local and state Department of Transportation budgets.

### County Roads

Onondaga County's Department of Transportation (DOT), led by a commissioner, has the responsibility of maintaining 808 miles of county roads and 240 bridge structures. The county legislature guides the department. The county DOT has four shops located in Jamesville, North Syracuse, Camillus, and Marcellus.

The functions of the county DOT include:

1. Reconstruction and widening of roads
2. Resurfacing (including pavement on county roads within villages)
3. Maintaining shoulders and drainage ditches
4. Providing guide rails and traffic control devices
5. Removing snow and controlling ice on portions of state roads (except interstate highways) and approximately three-quarters of county roads. Town highway departments clear the rest of the county road system under contract.

The traffic control program is responsible for providing traffic signals, traffic signs, and pavement striping. The department's paint shop at Jamesville prepares and erects signs and designs the layout of the road striping program. Preparation of an official road map, approved by the county legislature, is the responsibility of the commissioner of transportation. A road map of Onondaga County is available at the office of the Department of Transportation.

Much reconstruction is subcontracted to private road builders. No public hearing is required for construction and improvements of county roads unless federal aid is used.

The Consolidated Local Street and Highway Improvement Program (CHIPS) is the mechanism by which funds come from the Office of the State Comptroller to local municipalities for highway work.

The amount of aid received is formula-driven, based on center line and lane miles of locally maintained highways, vehicle registrations, and vehicle miles of travel. The aid is determined every year by the state legislature.

The federal government grants secondary road funds, which are distributed to state-approved county projects through the City of Syracuse and the State Department of Transportation.

## Town Roads

In Onondaga County, there are more than 1,900 miles of town and village roads. In each of the 19 towns, highway superintendents have a responsibility for maintaining and improving these roads. Taxes to support highway costs are collected through four separate highway funds that cover general maintenance, bridges, machinery, snow removal, and miscellaneous.

Villages are exempt from paying the general maintenance tax and, in some instances, some of the other funds. So, road costs are often a major expense of town governments.

Towns usually have very limited power to control traffic within their borders. They may erect stop signs at the intersections of town roads, subject to a public hearing. Where town and county roads (or town and state roads) intersect, the higher level of government has the authority to place stop signs or traffic signals. Speed limits and parking restrictions must be approved by the New York State Department of Transportation, although local officials must initiate requests for these limitations. Suburban towns (as described in Chapter Three) have greater traffic control power and may share in traffic fine receipts, as do cities and villages.

## City Streets

The Syracuse Department of Public Works (DPW) is responsible for 411 miles of city streets. Responsibilities are divided between several DPW divisions.

The maintenance and repair of streets and sidewalks is the responsibility of the Division of Design and Construction. Snow and ice control is a separate division within the DPW. The Division of Mapping & Surveying is responsible for surveying, designing, and constructing city streets and sidewalks. This division also has responsibility for the official city maps. Planning for new streets and rerouting or closing existing streets are functions of the Syracuse-Onondaga County Planning Agency (SOCPA) and the Syracuse Department of Neighborhood and Business Development with the concurrence of the city DPW.

In October 1980, Syracuse became the first municipality in the county to have its own asphalt-recycling plant. This plant uses old street material (asphalt) combined with small amounts of virgin asphalt and chemicals to produce enough material to meet all street repair and reconstruction needs.

The Bureau of Transportation, one of the many bureaus within the City of Syracuse's Department of Public Works, is concerned with the movement of people and vehicles within and through the city. The responsibilities of this bureau include traffic control, parking (lots, garages, and meters), advisement on bus routes and schedules, streetlights and signs,

and the parking program for people with disabilities. The Commissioner of Public Works collaborates with SOCPA, the Syracuse Community Development Department, and the city police department, to improve the safety and efficiency of traffic flow.

## Village Streets

In Onondaga County, there are over 150 miles of village streets. Most village boards of trustees appoint a superintendent of public works who is responsible for building and maintaining the village streets. In some villages, the titles and responsibilities may be different. These costs along with other costs including streetlights, sidewalks, street cleaning, and traffic control are included in the general fund of each village. Towns and villages may supply curbing and sidewalks along county and state roads that pass through their jurisdiction. State and county governments are responsible for paving these village roads and for paving and maintaining shoulders and drainage in town areas outside villages.

## Other Transportation Services

Although streets and highways account for the greatest part of government activity in transportation, there are other areas where government money and control are significant. The New York State Thruway Authority administers the New York State Canal System and maintains and operates the locks and navigable portions of the rivers and lakes that are connected to it. Federal and state agencies regulate, and at times, give financial assistance to the private carriers of passengers and freight.

The Syracuse Regional Airport Authority (SRAA) maintains and operates the Syracuse Hancock International Airport. The SRAA is a public benefit corporation recognized under the Public Authorities Law of the State of New York which allows the state to charter public corporations to perform a public benefit such as the maintenance of public infrastructure.

## Transportation Authority

In 1970 the Central New York Regional Transportation Authority (Centro) was established by the New York State Legislature with the responsibility to develop, improve, and operate mass transit facilities. The transportation district of CNYRTA includes Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Oswego counties. Three other counties – Cortland, Jefferson, and Madison – may join the authority by a vote of the respective county legislature.

Centro is comprised of seven subsidiary corporations: CNY Centro, Inc., Centro of Cayuga, Inc., Centro of Oswego, Inc., Centro of Oneida, Inc., Centro Call-A-Bus, Inc., and Centro Parking, Inc.. About 40 percent of the authority's operating costs are supported by revenues received from passengers; federal, state, and local funding comprise the difference.

In 2012, CNY Centro opened a new Centro Transit Hub with a 22-bay terminal and covered shelter to protect riders from the weather while they wait for the bus. The Hub is the main transfer location for Centro Syracuse buses and serves as a connecting point to Centro Auburn and Centro Oswego bus services.

Since its inception, the authority has instituted projects to encourage people to use bus transportation as well as biking and scootering services. Services include shuttle buses to community events, holiday and seasonal promotions, shopping and school services, transportation for disabled and senior citizens, and parking convenience services.

CNYRTA opened an Intermodal Transportation Center, the William F. Walsh Regional Transportation Center, during the 1990's. In addition to CNY Centro Inc., tenants at the center include, Amtrak, Greyhound, and Trailways. The intermodal transportation center provides seamless service for any form of transportation in and out of the Syracuse area, making travel throughout the area more convenient and efficient.

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