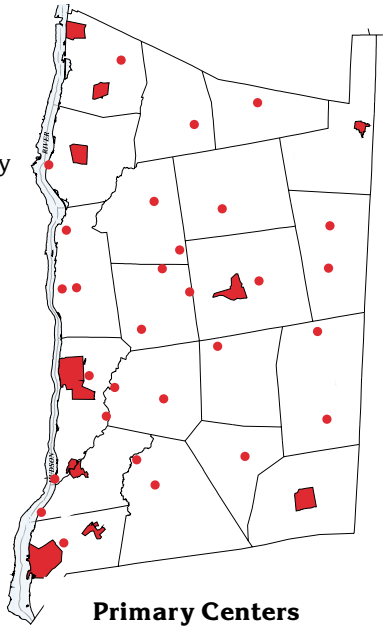
Settlement Patterns

Centers are the traditional central places of community life. They come in all sizes, from crossroad hamlets to more self-sufficient villages and larger cities with multiple neighborhoods. Most centers are historic places with long-established landmark structures, such as churches, public buildings, and civic monuments. They also contain a commercial core, sometimes just a hamlet corner store, but typically rows of storefronts along central streets. The ability for residents to walk, meet their neighbors on the street, and build a stronger sense of community is a primary virtue of centers.



Primary Centers

Centers work best when they are close-knit and compact in form, supporting central utilities and having a mixture of uses within a five to ten minute walk of surrounding residential areas.

Centers grow by additions at the fringe, by infill replacement of unwanted buildings or vacant lots at the core, by converting automobile oriented strip development, and less often by creating a new central place. Almost every center in Dutchess County has been established for a long time. Comprehensive plans can designate growth areas for new or expanding centers so that growth does not occur in random or sprawling patterns. Building more cohesive and multifaceted centers is a primary benefit of following Greenway principles in planning decisions.

The hamlet of Amenia replaced a front yard bank parking lot at its main intersection with a veterans' monument and the original stone fountain that marked the center of town.

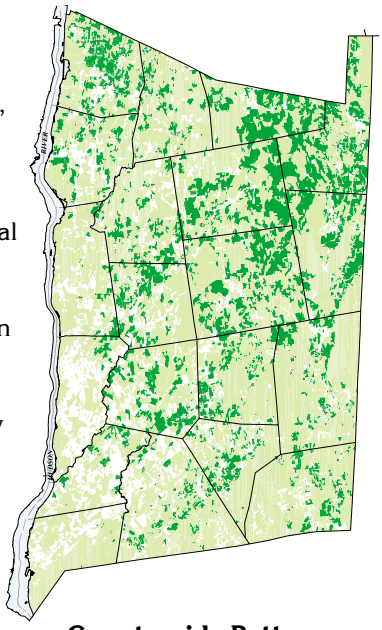
Village of Tivoli

Key Principles for Centers:

- Focus development within walking distance of a central core or neighborhood center to encourage alternatives to the car and efficient use of land;
- Encourage a mixture of uses with prominent central locations for civic structures, such as post offices and municipal buildings;
- Identify priority growth areas, both infill redevelopment sites and growth areas that will strengthen existing centers or establish new centers.

Illustration by: Patricia M. Houston, DCPD

Countryside includes the rural areas, farmlands, and forests outside centers and still beyond the reach of suburban development. Aerial photographs of Dutchess County from the 1930s show farmland as the predominant land pattern, a working rural landscape with intermittent crossroad hamlets and compact centers for services, supplies, and public functions. But since then, the countryside has been in gradual retreat, primarily from suburban house lots on former farm fields. A widely held assumption, based on past development practices and built into our zoning codes, is that every developable parcel in rural areas will eventually be transformed into a new commercial or residential use.



Countryside Pattern

Many local residents and groups, from farm organizations and the Farmland Protection Board to local officials, land trusts, and environmental advocates, have begun to work together to protect our rural heritage, while still accommodating growth and change. Agriculture, one of the major economic generators in Dutchess County, needs not only the best farm practices to protect important soils and prevent erosion, it now requires political protection: fair tax policies, right-to-farm provisions, and protection against harmful regulations. In particular, land use practices should allow a level of development in rural areas without replacing farmlands and destroying the open characteristics of the landscape. Once the land is subdivided into a crop of uniform house lots, farming and the rural way of life we love as Dutchess County residents is gone forever.

Our identity, what makes Dutchess County distinctive from the built-up metropolitan areas to the south, is largely founded on its traditional rural land patterns - the rolling topography with open farm fields, barns, stone walls, scattered homesteads, crossroad hamlets, and wooded hillsides.

Harlem Valley

Key Principles for the Countryside:

- Protect farmlands and farm soils through conservation development techniques and coordinated efforts to support agricultural operations;
- Maintain the open, rural character of the landscape, protecting critical environmental areas and preventing strip commercial or residential development lining the roadways;
- Scatter new buildings in tree lines or group in hamlet-forms, retaining more than half of the land as part of interconnected open space systems.

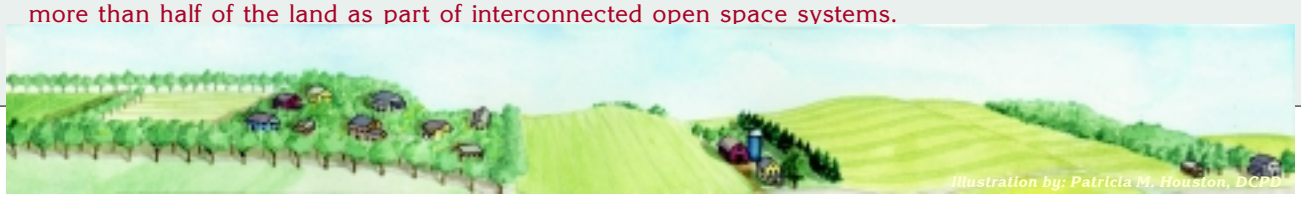
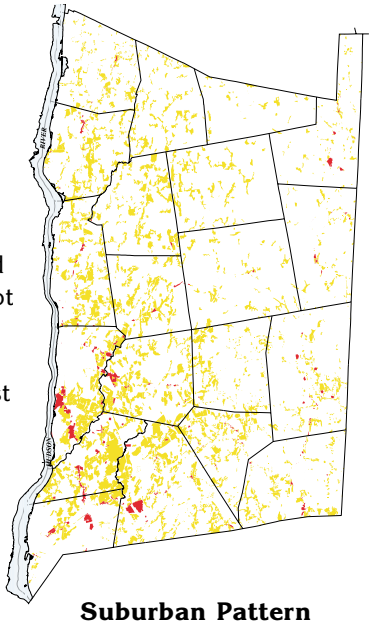


Illustration by: Patricia M. Houston, DCPD

Suburbs are existing spread-out, single-use areas, such as outlying single-family residential or highway business districts. Suburban subdivisions tend to leap-frog out into the countryside, while commercial zones spread out in a strip fashion along arterial highways. They are almost completely auto dependent, with separated uses and low density distances encouraged by the district regulations of zoning laws. Because every errand or trip to the store involves miles of asphalt and acres of parking lots, suburbs create the seemingly contradictory combination of low density sprawl and a high level of congestion caused by all those converging cars. Too much traffic and not enough parking are common complaints.

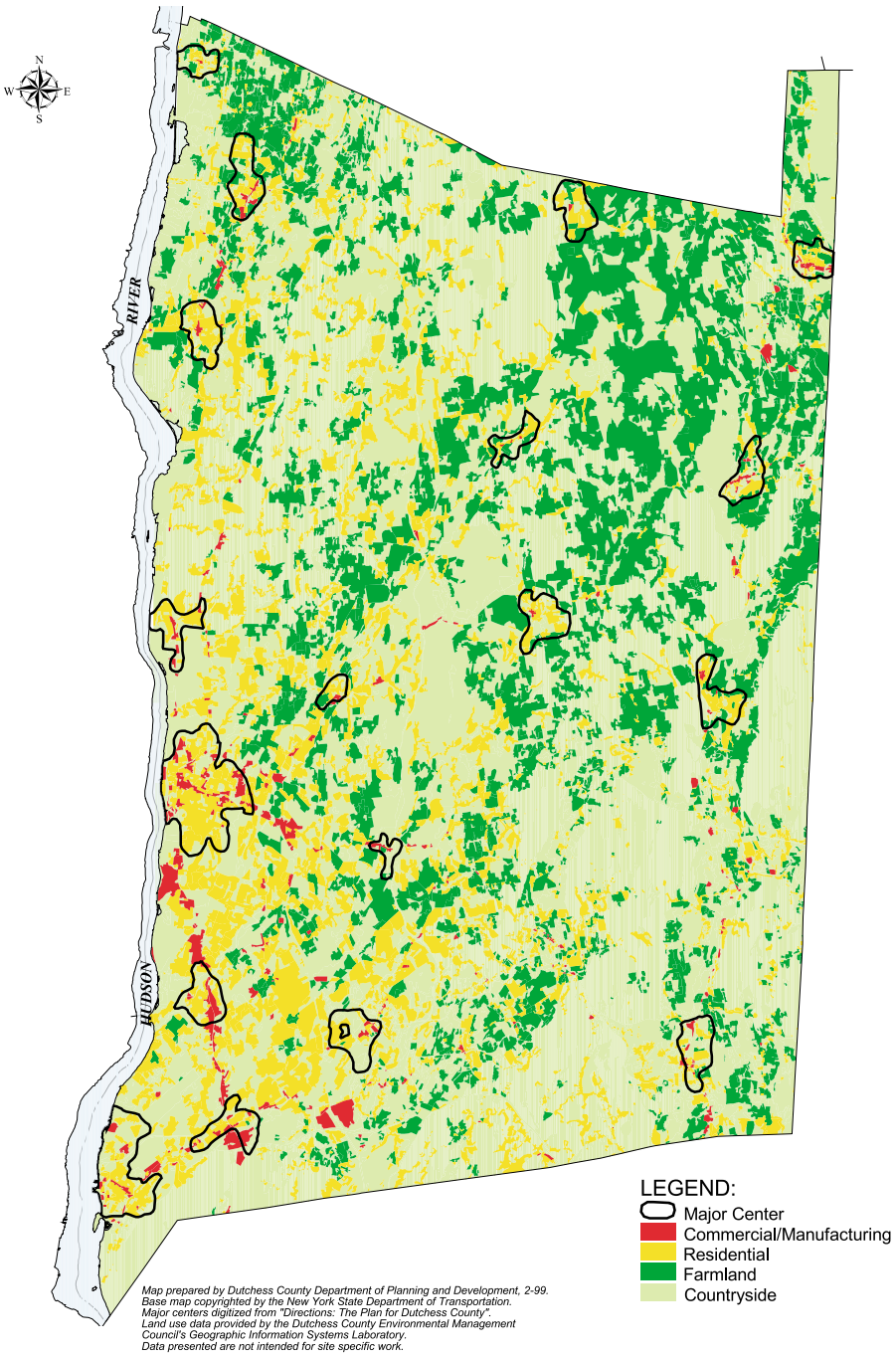
Almost all suburban growth is a product of the last 40 years, but suburbs are the fastest growing areas of the county. The general appeal of single-family subdivisions includes "moving to the country," more space, lower taxes, and newer schools. But with each new subdivision the countryside continues to move away, higher population and the demand for more spread-out services and new school buildings forces up taxes, and the surrounding open space soon becomes someone else's back yard. The appealing aspects of suburban life can be satisfied without uniformly covering the countryside with house lots and clogging our roads with traffic.



Suburban Pattern

Key principles for Suburbs:

- Gradually connect separated subdivisions into neighborhoods through interconnecting streets and pathways;
- Create focal points for community interaction (small retail cluster, public building, park or playground) within a 5 to 10 minute walk of most houses to act as a neighborhood center;
- Encourage commercial strips to become mixed use centers over time by limiting the length of the district and promoting infill to the rear and along the fronts of large parking lots.

Greenway principles support reinforcing centers as primary growth areas, fitting any outlying development into the natural landscape to preserve farmland and open spaces, and providing strategies to pull together separated subdivisions and commercial districts into more connected neighborhoods or mixed use centers.

Settlement Patterns