2 Quality of Life

POLICY
To foster a greater sense of “Town of Reading” identity, facilitate easier and stronger connections throughout the community, and to provide greater outreach and opportunity to become involved in local government.

2.1 DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS
A high quality of life in a small town atmosphere is the defining characteristic of living in the Town of Reading. Residents strongly value the rural, quiet, and peaceful environment afforded by their natural surroundings, and consistently identify this aspect of the local lifestyle as the primary motivator for living in Reading. Protecting this rural character is the top priority for the future of the Town of Reading.

The Town of Reading defines its rural character as one that incorporates the vast natural surroundings, low-density development, and specific cultural and lifestyle preferences of residents.

The people of Reading value their open spaces such as forests and working agricultural lands as they provide a backdrop where one can enjoy nature in their own backyard as well as a source of income for many residents. They value the existing rural residential characteristics of large lot farms, small hamlets, and lakeside cottages. Further, residents appreciate the cultural aspects of living in Reading such as the strongly independent and self-reliant nature of the people, the low-cost, low-service, low-regulations environment, and a community that finds strength in its family connections, churches, and civic organizations to meet the local needs of residents.

These attributes provide opportunities for local business to grow, provide an affordable cost of living, and provide a high quality of life for residents. By maintaining and enhancing these attributes, the Town of Reading can ensure that the best aspects of the town continue to serve current residents as well as attract new opportunities that reflect the local values.

Why did you move to the Town of Reading (Top 5 Reasons)

- Small Town/Rural Character: 45.1%
- Quality of Life: 35.3%
- My/Spouse’s Family Lives Here: 29.4%
- Recreational Opportunities: 22.0%
- Cost of Living: 20.2%
Residents identify the top strength of the Town of Reading to be the rural and small town character. Many of the other identified strengths further reinforced this idea such as: agriculture, peace and quiet, natural environment, open space, and scenic views.

Agriculture provides residents with a local base for employment, tourism, local food, and a scenic landscape. The natural landscape is visually stunning, and is enjoyed by residents and tourists alike. Natural areas such as forests and Seneca Lake also provide opportunities for recreation such as biking, hiking, hunting, boating, swimming, and fishing. The rural environment provides residents with peaceful, quiet surroundings, privacy, and a ‘bit of elbow room’ to work and enjoy life.

While residents enjoy a rural lifestyle, they also enjoy close regional proximity to the opportunities provided by nearby hamlets, villages, and cities. Being close to hamlets and villages throughout the Finger Lakes region provides residents the ability to enjoy local specialties such as culinary trails and tastings, cultural activities and festivals, outdoor recreation opportunities, and a variety of job opportunities. Larger nearby cities such as Rochester, Ithaca, Elmira, and Corning allow residents to experience an even more diverse set of activities, restaurants, museums, jobs and cultural events.

Residents of Reading are very fond of the people who live here. Bonds with family, neighbors, and friends are the primary forms of personal connection to the community. Family ties keep residents in Reading as well as draw former residents back. These connections provide social support to residents and help to foster local pride and support for entrepreneurial endeavors and local businesses.

Any future decisions in the town should consider these strengths and the benefits they provide to current and future residents of the Town of Reading.
Community

POLICY

To foster a greater sense of “Town of Reading” identity, facilitate easier and stronger connections throughout the community, and to provide greater outreach and opportunity to become involved in local government.

2.3 RESIDENT INVOLVEMENT IN THE COMMUNITY

Town of Reading residents connect with the community primarily through family, friends, and neighbors. Many also socialize and mingle at informal gathering spaces such as coffee shops and restaurants.

In general, however, residents do not feel a cohesive sense of community in the Town of Reading. The strong identity that nearby towns possess is something that is desired by Reading residents.

Many residents desire more locations to randomly and casually run into one another. In a rural setting such as Reading, this could easily be a coffee shop, diner, park or community events. Other residents desire a way to connect with potential employers, employees, or business connections.

A communal posting board at either the town hall or online could be used to spread the word about a variety of events and opportunities.

Examples:

- Farm Festival
  - Requires no Infrastructure
- Fly in Breakfast at ReDunn Field.
- Communal Working Space
  - Can build on Broadband Network once Built
- Breakfast / Coffee Joint

One means of addressing resident involvement in the community would be for the Town Board to appoint a volunteer Community Engagement Committee to investigate possible actions and identify what actions have the greatest potential to boost resident involvement. Such a committee could help bring in grant funding and work with community organizations to provide events, programs, or facilities that foster a greater sense of community.

2.4 RESIDENT INVOLVEMENT IN TOWN GOVERNMENT

Nearly 30% of the population claims to participate in local government issues at least some of the time. However, the town has trouble finding people filling volunteer positions on boards and committees. A different outreach approach along with a more easily accessible system for advertising any vacancies could improve volunteer rates and attendance to town committees.

An important step to instill public trust in the local government and foster future community engagement will be to adopt additional methods of engagement that are inclusive, far reaching, and accessible for all residents.

Ideas include:

- Facebook or other social media
- Online or town hall comment submission
- Small group or one-on-one discussion and comment
- Posting for vacancies online and on a community board
- Less stringent requirements for appointing committee and board members

Active government officials and volunteers want to feel that they can have a real and positive influence in town matters. Residents considering government involvement should be able to genuinely participate in an easy and responsive manner.
Housing

**POLICY**

*To preserve the character of existing neighborhoods and residential areas while encouraging a diverse range of housing types, prices, and improvements/investments to develop and blend in with the existing character.*

### 2.5 HOUSING OVERVIEW

There are a total of 854 housing units in the Town of Reading. With a population of 1,707 residents, there are approximately 2 people per household on average in the town. Housing consists primarily of single family, owner occupied homes on rural lots.

Major concerns with housing include quality, age, affordability, and housing variety. Young adults in particular cite the lack of rentals, and poor quality housing to be major barriers to finding a place to live. Senior housing is identified as an upcoming and ongoing concern as the population ages and shifts the types of housing and services they require.

**Survey Results: How would you rate the following housing issues in the Town of Reading?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Medium Issue</th>
<th>Large Issue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vacancy Rate</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing Affordability</td>
<td>27.1%</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of Housing Units</td>
<td>28.3%</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Housing Units</td>
<td>33.8%</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity of Housing Types</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location of Housing</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.6 NEIGHBORHOOD TYPES

There are three distinct neighborhood types in the Town of Reading: Rural Hillside, Traditional Neighborhood or Hamlet, and Lakeside Cottages. All three have specific characteristics and provide a variety of options for residents. Maintaining and enhancing the distinct character of each neighborhood type is strongly valued among residents.

**Rural Hillside**

Most of the Town of Reading exhibits characteristics of a rural neighborhood community. It contains predominantly areas of low density, agriculture, rural residences, and forests. Large and small lots with farms and non-farming residences all coexist alongside one another. Most residences are spread out with space for privacy, quiet, and peaceful enjoyment of one’s land.

![Typical Rural Hillside Density/Configuration](attachment:image.jpg)

*Photo Credit: STC Regional Planning Board*
Quality of Life

**Traditional Neighborhoods and Hamlets**

A traditional neighborhood pattern exists in both Reading Center and the small neighborhood adjacent to Watkins Glen. Houses are on small lots and the layout forms a compact neighborhood filled with homes, businesses, and community amenities. Reading Center provides opportunities to run errands, shop, and meet neighbors. The Post Office, in particular, is a popular location for catching up on town happenings.

**Lakeside Cottages**

The homes and cottages along Seneca Lake provide a scenic, beautiful place for both permanent residents and seasonal visitors to enjoy. These homes are typically on small lots directly between the water and a steep hillside. They have direct access to Seneca Lake and some include wooded areas, providing a wealth of recreational opportunities.
2.7 HOUSING TYPES

The predominant housing types in the Town are single family homes and mobile homes, along with a small number of duplexes. This is typical of other similar rural towns in the area.

Single family homes were listed as a beneficial type of housing by over 65% of town residents in the survey. This shows that the predominance of this type of housing in the town reflects that preference of a large majority of residents.

The median age in the Town of Reading is currently 48.7, which means that over the next 10-20 years, a significant part of the local population will have a shift in housing and service needs as they enter their later years. Even as they age, people hope to stay in the community. More than three quarters of survey respondents said that they plan on living in the community for the rest of their lives. Among the oldest survey respondents, aged 75 years and older, fully 96% percent plan to live in Reading for the rest of their lives. New mixed housing types will become particularly relevant and needed as the population continues to age.

Variety of Housing Types

Survey Results: Do you plan on living in the Town of Reading the rest of your life?

Examples of Housing in the Town of Reading

Data: ACS 2009-2014

Photo Credit: Southern Tier Central Regional Planning Board
While single family homes are a strongly desired housing type in the town, a lack of variety of housing types can present struggle for residents at various stages in their lives. Some residents may prefer two or multi-family units for a variety of reasons including cost, lack of maintenance responsibilities, and social benefits. Senior housing can also provide a way for residents to remain in the Town and receive the amenities and services they need as they age.

**Survey Results: What types of housing would be beneficial addition to your community?**

While these types of housing are likely to be found in Watkins Glen or Montour Falls, the Town of Reading does have some opportunity to create different styles and housing opportunities. For instance, duplexes could be appropriate in Reading Center or other hamlet areas. Small multi-family units could blend into the neighborhood adjacent to Watkins Glen where they can tie into public infrastructure.
2.8 HOUSING TENURE

The majority of housing stock in the Town of Reading is owner-occupied. This is a market that will always exist in the Town of Reading, and provides benefits to the town and residents. However, a variety of housing alternatives would provide residents more choices to fit their lifestyle and housing needs. Younger adults may not be able to afford a home right away. Rental housing provides a good alternative for them to ease into the housing market without requiring large financial investments. Older adults may also benefit from a variety of rental options, allowing them to relinquish some of the responsibility and work of property maintenance. Rental housing is commonly thought of as larger complexes, but this does not necessarily have to be the case. It can also include singles houses and duplexes or small multi-family units (3-6 family).

2.9 HOUSING AGE

Almost half of the housing in the Town of Reading was built before 1960. Older housing stock can require more frequent and expensive changes to modernize or maintain their quality. While some residents will have the resources to invest in older homes, many residents may not. This may be especially true for younger residents looking to purchase a home for the first time, as well as aging residents looking to downsize or transition to senior housing. The Town should explore strategies to ensure that the housing stock is compliant with NYS Building and Maintenance Codes and to encourage energy efficient housing upgrades. Education about state or regional grant programs to assist in updating housing could provide beneficial resources to residents.
**2.10 HOUSING AFFORDABILITY**

In order for any kind of housing to be considered affordable, the cost of that housing must be at or below 30% of the average household income of the person or people who would live there.

In general, housing in the Town of Reading is considered to be affordable, but there is a large difference between the affordability of housing types. Rental housing in the Town of Reading is overall more expensive for the people living in it than owner occupied housing.

Owner occupied housing is typically less than 30% of the homeowners income, and nearly half of homes are less than 20% of the owners income. Although owner occupied housing is overall affordable, there is a small but noteworthy percentage of homes with costs more than 35% of their owners’ income, many of which may be lakefront homes where housing prices are the highest.

On the flip side, over half of rental properties are above 30% of renters’ income. This creates a financial hardship on residents who cannot afford to or do not wish to own a home, and dis-incentivizes potential residents who would prefer to rent. Encouraging affordable rental housing development in the Town would benefit all residents of the Town of Reading.

### Selected Monthly Owner Cost as a Percentage of Household Income

![Graph showing selected monthly owner cost as a percentage of household income](image)

### Gross Rent as a Percentage of Household Income

![Graph showing gross rent as a percentage of household income](image)
2.11 HOME VALUES
The Town of Reading has a high median home value of $140,000 compared to other municipalities in the region (Schuyler County Median: $99,700), creating benefits and concerns for residents. Coupled with the high value of land and high property taxes, large lots with large homes produce high value, high cost housing in the town. Many of the most expensive homes are located along the lakeshore with views and water access to Seneca Lake.

High housing values benefit the town tax base and individual residents when they sell their homes, but high housing costs also weigh on current residents and prevent new or young residents from being able to afford a home, driving people away from the town. Under the current Town of Reading Land Use Law as of September 2016, a number of successful strategies to provide affordable housing are currently allowed, including housing variety, small lots, and micro-homes. The Land Use Law enables housing variety by permitting any type of housing, with proper approvals, in any location in the town, near or adjacent to any other housing type or other land use. Small lots are possible, even though the Land Use Law generally requires two acres for each dwelling unit without municipal water and sewer services, because section 3.3 of the current law (as of September 2016) authorizes the planning board to grant modifications to this and other standards and section 4.2 establishes leeway for the planning board to approve development of lots with buildable areas as small as 2,500 square feet when justified by the site conditions with the exception of within the Seneca Lake Protection Area which requires 2 acre lots. The Land Use Law contains no minimum square-footage for dwelling units or other restrictions on small homes, effectively allowing any micro-home that meets the standards of the New York State Unified Fire Prevention and Building Code. Promoting or encouraging such housing in any future developments would assist in alleviating high housing costs in the Town. Any future subdivision law or any amendments to the land use law that are adopted should also allow for such strategies to be pursued.

Housing Values in Town of Reading

Data: ACS 2009-2014
2.12 HOUSING OCCUPANCY/ VACANCY

The Town of Reading has a 24% vacancy rate among all housing units. Some level of vacancy is desirable, as it provides opportunity for residents looking to move to the town or change locations within the town. Homes that are vacant temporarily while for sale or for rent account for a small number of the housing units classified as vacant.

The majority of vacant units, however, are vacant due to the residence being used for recreational, seasonal, or occasional use. The American Community Survey estimates that 54% of vacant housing units, equal to 13% of all housing, are for such occasional uses. These homes can be a tax benefit to the town, as they typically pay taxes, but do not require year round services.

The remaining vacant housing units in the Town of Reading, estimated at 11% of all housing, are not for sale, rent, or occasional use. Many of these are simply abandoned. Some concerns have also been reported with vacant homes and properties, citing vandal or drug related behaviors on certain properties. Ensuring consistent property maintenance could discourage some of these behaviors if they are centered on deteriorating or otherwise abandoned property. A concerted effort to work with county law enforcement in problem locations could also help alleviate some issues.

2.13 HOUSING HEATING TYPES

Town of Reading residents use a variety of energy sources to heat their home.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HOME HEATING FUEL</th>
<th>EXPLANATION OR EXAMPLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Utility Gas</td>
<td>Gas piped through underground pipes from a central system to serve the neighborhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bottled, Tank, or LP Gas</td>
<td>Propane gas stored in bottles or tanks that are refilled or exchanged when empty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity</td>
<td>Electricity that is generally supplied by means of aboveground or underground electric power lines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fuel Oil, Kerosene, etc.</td>
<td>Fuel oil, kerosene, gasoline, alcohol, and other combustible liquids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coal or Coke</td>
<td>Coal or coke that is usually distributed by truck and burned in a stove hearth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wood</td>
<td>Purchased wood, wood cut by household members on their property or elsewhere, driftwood, sawmill or construction scraps, and the like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solar Energy</td>
<td>Heat provided by sunlight that is collected, stored, and actively distributed to most of the rooms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Fuel</td>
<td>All other fuels not specified elsewhere</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.14 PROPERTY MAINTENANCE

Property Maintenance is cited as the biggest concern among residents in regards to the current housing stock. This is manifested in two forms: 1) Residents want their neighbors to maintain a good aesthetic on their property, and 2) Residents want to be able to maintain their own property with little hassle or unnecessary regulation. These two desires are somewhat at odds, because regulation and enforcement is an effective strategy to maintaining aesthetically pleasing properties to align with community values.

2.15 ACTION ITEMS

Community

1. Consider creating a Town of Reading Community Engagement Committee to explore opportunities to foster a greater sense of community.

2. Post all vacancies for committee and board openings on social media and town website.

3. Post all town events/meetings on social media and town website.

4. Organize quarterly community events, to be held at town hall or other location. Encourage residents of all ages to build a stronger sense of community.

Housing

5. Promote housing development and maintenance that enhances the distinct character of each neighborhood type in the town, including rural hillside, hamlet neighborhoods, and lakeside cottages.

6. Use the flexibility and permissiveness of the Town of Reading Land Use Law to increase the variety of living options available, with an emphasis on housing options for young professionals and residents who hope to “age in place.” Consider incorporating specific review considerations into the Land Use Law that allow the planning board to offer modifications to lot size, setbacks, or other dimensional requirements as site-appropriate incentives for developments that include living options desired by the community.

7. Provide education about grant opportunities and encourage energy efficient housing upgrades of older homes to take full advantage of the existing housing stock.

8. Encourage future developments to provide affordable housing options for town residents, including where appropriate a mix of housing types, small lots, or micro-homes as currently allowed in the Town of Reading Land Use Law.

9. Encourage consistent code enforcement.