



Planning & Community Development

2026

Quarterly
Newsletter

March

A Message from the Director

Our second newsletter of 2026 highlights several important efforts underway across the County. You will find updates on the launch of Jefferson County's **first countywide public transit system**, progress on the **countywide Housing Needs Assessment**, and local planning initiatives such as the **Town of Henderson Comprehensive Plan update**. We are also pleased to welcome **Alicia Dewey** as our new Deputy Director, whose experience and commitment to local government will further strengthen the department's ability to support municipalities throughout the region.

Our office remains available to assist local governments with project reviews, land use planning, training opportunities, and identifying funding resources that support community priorities. We encourage municipalities to reach out early when considering planning initiatives, zoning updates, or development proposals so we can work together to help move those efforts forward.

Thank you for taking the time to stay informed about planning and community development efforts across Jefferson County. We look forward to continuing our work together to support resilient communities, thoughtful growth, and a strong regional future!

—Hartley

Staff Members and Updates

Meet the New Deputy Director

Alicia Dewey joined Jefferson County as Deputy Director of Planning and Community Development in January 2026, bringing more than 15 years of experience in public administration, municipal finance, and community development across Northern New York. Many in the region may already know Alicia from her years of service with the Town of Clayton, where she served in the roles of Budget Officer and Clerk to the Supervisor, and the Village of Clayton where she served as Treasurer, helping guide municipal budgeting, capital projects, and policy initiatives that supported long-term community planning and infrastructure investment. Throughout her career, Alicia has worked closely with local and regional partners to advance zoning updates, grant-funded infrastructure projects, and community development efforts. She has also contributed to numerous nonprofit and civic initiatives throughout the region. Alicia brings a collaborative approach and a strong commitment to supporting sustainable growth and vibrant communities across Jefferson County.

Planning Staff

Director:

Hartley Bonisteel
Schweitzer, AICP

Deputy Director:

Alicia M. Dewey

Senior Planner:

Andy Nevin

Community Development Coordinators:

Sam Wilson
Aileen Anderson

Secretary:

Emerald Macilvennie



Jefferson County to Launch Public Transit System

Jefferson County is getting ready to launch its first countywide public bus system, a major step toward improving transportation access across the region. The buses arrived in early March and are now undergoing registration, inspections, and final preparations, with service expected to begin in mid-May.

The new system will connect rural communities to Watertown and other key destinations through four main routes serving the northern, southern, east-west, and Thousand Islands areas. Routes will operate in a hub-and-spoke format centered on Watertown, with stops near major destinations such as workplaces, Jefferson Community College, medical offices, and shopping areas.

Reliable transportation has long been a challenge for many residents, particularly in rural parts of the county. The new bus network is designed to help close that gap by providing a consistent and accessible option for reaching jobs, services, and everyday destinations.

The project is funded primarily through the Federal Transit Administration's Section 5311 Rural Area Formula Grant Program, with additional support from state and local partners. Jefferson County has partnered with The ARC Jefferson-St. Lawrence to operate the system, while staff in the Jefferson County Department of Planning and Community Development will oversee the system's operations and broader mobility management efforts across the county.



Local Planning Assistance

Our office is here to support local governments with project reviews, land use training, and assistance in developing land use regulations and zoning maps. We are also happy to work alongside communities that are updating comprehensive plans or pursuing broader community development initiatives. If your municipality is considering changes or simply wants to talk through ideas, we welcome the opportunity to connect and help move those efforts forward.

Thank you for taking the time to stay informed about planning efforts in our community. Your interest and engagement are appreciated, and we look forward to continuing to work together.

Town of Henderson Comprehensive Plan Update



The Town of Henderson is nearing completion of its Comprehensive Plan update and is preparing to adopt the 2026 Henderson Comprehensive Land Use Plan, which will replace the Town's existing 2004 Comprehensive Plan. The update has been a collaborative effort between the Town and the Jefferson County Department of Planning and Community Development, which provided technical assistance, planning support, and facilitation throughout the process. The project reflects the County's broader commitment to assisting municipalities with local planning initiatives and helping communities build the policy framework needed to guide growth and investment.

The planning process included several opportunities for public input, beginning with a community survey and workshop, followed by a second session to refine the Town's vision and goals, and a final public meeting to review the draft plan. A townwide inventory examined demographic, housing, economic, transportation, community facility, natural resource, and land use trends.

Residents consistently emphasized the importance of preserving shoreline areas, natural resources, and agricultural land while maintaining the Town's rural character and quality of life. Key priorities that emerged include development of a sewer district, expanded waterfront recreation opportunities, and thoughtful management of future growth. The plan includes an implementation framework identifying priority actions, potential funding sources, and responsible partners. Intended to guide decision-making over the next five to ten years, final adoption of the plan is expected within the next two months.

Kudos to the Town of Henderson for taking on this important effort!

Jefferson County Launches Housing Needs Assessment

Jefferson County has kicked off a countywide Housing Needs Assessment to take a closer look at local housing challenges and identify practical solutions for the future. The Jefferson County Board of Legislators recently approved an agreement with czb LLC to lead the study, which will help the County better understand housing trends and develop strategies to expand housing opportunities.

Housing in Jefferson County is influenced by several unique factors, including the presence of Fort Drum, a diverse civilian workforce, seasonal waterfront communities, and rural towns where infrastructure can be limited. Together, these dynamics can put pressure on housing availability and affordability for year-round residents and workers. Limited supply and rising rents have also made it harder for local employers to attract and retain employees.

The Housing Needs Assessment will look at housing supply, affordability, demographic trends, and the condition of the County's housing stock. The goal is to better understand where gaps exist and to identify realistic strategies to support new housing development, preserve existing homes, and improve affordability.

Community input will be an important part of the process. Residents, employers, developers, and housing organizations will have opportunities to share their perspectives and help shape the conversation.

Once the study is complete, it will help guide future housing policy and investment decisions so Jefferson County can continue support the County's housing needs.

Abstentions vs. Recusals

A quick guide for Planning Boards and Zoning Boards of Appeals

In smaller and more rural communities, board members often know applicants personally, live near project sites, or have professional relationships within the community. Because of this, questions about **abstaining** from a vote versus **recusing** oneself come up more often than many people expect. Understanding the difference helps boards make decisions confidently while maintaining transparency and public trust.

Abstention: an abstention is used when a board member does not have enough information to make a decision.

Board members should generally avoid abstaining simply because they are uncertain or uncomfortable making a decision. Members are appointed to review applications, ask questions, and make decisions based on the information available. In most cases, motions are approved by an affirmative vote, so an abstention effectively functions the same as voting “no.”

A few important things to remember about abstentions:

- Abstaining does not affect quorum. The member still counts toward the minimum number of members required for the board to conduct business.
- A member who abstains may still participate in discussion and offer comments or perspectives.
- Repeated abstentions without a clear reason may be viewed as failing to carry out the responsibilities of the position.

Recusal: a recusal occurs when a board member has a conflict of interest and must remove themselves from consideration of a project.

Conflicts are most often financial, but they may also arise in situations where a member’s relationship to the applicant or project could reasonably raise concerns about impartiality. In rural communities where professional and personal networks are small, these situations can occur fairly regularly.

Best practices for recusal include the following:

- The member should announce the recusal before discussion begins.
- The member should step away from the conversation entirely and avoid influencing other members.
- The member should not participate in discussion and then recuse only when it is time to vote.

Unlike abstentions, recusals do affect quorum. Once a member recuses themselves, they are no longer counted toward the number of members needed for the board to take action. On smaller boards, this can sometimes affect whether the board is able to vote on an application at that meeting.

Clear and consistent handling of abstentions and recusals helps boards operate fairly, transparently, and in accordance with state law. If your board ever encounters a situation that is unclear, the Jefferson County Department of Planning and Community Development is always available to help talk through it.

County Planning Board 2026 Meeting Schedule

The Jefferson County Planning Board meets the last Tuesday of each month at 4:00 p.m. in the Planning Department Conference Room, 175 Arsenal Street, Watertown, unless otherwise noted. The October meeting will be at the Watertown International Airport. *(Submission deadlines are typically set 12 days before each meeting.)*

Submission Deadline	CPB Meeting Date
Thursday, January 15	Tuesday, January 27
Thursday, February 12	Tuesday, February 24
Thursday, March 19	Tuesday, March 31
Thursday, April 16	Tuesday, April 28
Thursday, May 14	Tuesday, May 26
Thursday, June 18	Tuesday, June 30
Thursday, July 16	Tuesday, July 28
Thursday, August 13	Tuesday, August 25
Thursday, September 17	Tuesday, September 29
Thursday, October 15	Tuesday, October 27
Thursday, November 12	Tuesday, November 24
Thursday, December 17	Tuesday, December 29

Referral Form Updates

Local municipal clerks, zoning officers, planning board and zoning board of appeals chairs please note our [new referral form](#) should now be utilized. This is a fillable form on our Department website for ease of use, under **County Planning Board Information**. Please note we added lines for site address and email addresses of both applicants and municipal representatives. This will allow us to immediately communicate when meetings may be canceled (weather related) as well as email response letters to the municipality in a more timely manner than mailing them alone. Enjoy!

Early referral submission is encouraged!

As highlighted in our last newsletter, Our staff are undertaking several exciting endeavors in 2026. Municipalities are strongly encouraged to submit 239-m referrals **as early as possible**, as opposed to waiting until the submission deadline. Early submission will ensure we can provide our best possible customer service for this foundational community assistance. As a reminder, projects will not be accepted after submission deadlines.

What to Send

Each referral must include a **“full statement”** of the action being reviewed. That means everything your local board has received as part of the application, such as:

- A completed **Environmental Assessment Form (EAF)**
- **Site plans** drawn to scale, showing existing and proposed features
- **Project descriptions**, reports, or studies (traffic, drainage, lighting, etc.)
- **The Proposed zoning text** or local law if it involves a code amendment
Submitting a complete package ensures both the local and County boards can make timely, informed recommendations.

Planning Board Members

Lisa Ruggiero – Chair
John Stano – Vice Chair
Randy Lake
Jean Waterbury
Neil Katzman
Richard Nuijens
Jon Storms
Mitch Robinson
Joe McLaughlin
Karen Freeman