

# SENECA COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN UPDATE 2001



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1.



# INTRODUCTION



Planning can be defined as the deliberate, organized and continuous process of preparing the information necessary to advise elected officials on actions relevant to growth and change. The comprehensive plan, an important product of this process, details the development of goals, and graphically portrays the spatial relationships of a proposed county pattern. The comprehensive plan provides the strategic view of what the community will physically resemble in the future, and the general policy statements of how to get there. It provides the framework for more detailed development or functional plans, such as parks and open space, utilities, land use, transportation and neighborhood redevelopment. It is a guide for developers, landowners, concerned citizens, planning commissions, and elected officials as they make decisions about land.

Comprehensive planning has been done in Seneca County since the 1970's when the Seneca Regional Planning Commission completed the County's first comprehensive plan. As counties grow and experience change, it is often necessary to update the comprehensive plan. Since the last comprehensive plan was completed, the region has experienced growth in population and economic development. The County has also expressed a desire to adopt farmland preservation techniques to preserve the way of life in many of the rural parts of the County. Also, the majority of goals from the previous comprehensive plan has been exhausted or has become outdated. To ensure continued prosperity, the County has determined that a comprehensive plan update is needed. The County began the process of updating the comprehensive plan in June 1999. The plan was completed in November 2001.

Since the plan contains a community vision, citizen involvement in the planning process is critical to its overall success. Before a vision can be established, citizens must understand why planning is important and how the comprehensive plan can become a tool to guide Seneca County into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The comprehensive plan can be characterized as long-range, comprehensive and general. It is long-range in that it projects 20 to 30 years into the future. It is comprehensive in that it encompasses all geographical parts of the community and all the functional elements that

bear on physical development. It is general in that the plan designates only the general location, character and extent of the major physical elements of the community.

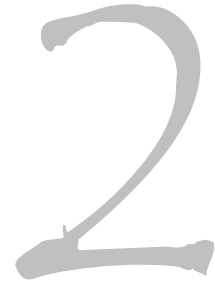
The plan is based on citizen input and careful studies of the planning areas, which merge into a broad consensus on land use and the location of future development. That is, the comprehensive plan sets forth a realistic vision for how the community should grow and develop. It is flexible, however, capable of responding to changing needs and technical innovation.

To be an effective guide into the future, the comprehensive plan must be a clear and definite statement of policy, it should be used by city officials and interested citizens, and it should be officially adopted by the legislative body of the community.

2.



COUNTY PROFILE



## **COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION**

Community participation is an essential component of the comprehensive planning process. In Seneca County, public input was obtained through interviews, focus groups, and surveys with local officials, County residents, and realtors.

### **COUNTY OFFICIALS SURVEY**

Early in the planning process, Seneca County officials were surveyed to provide critical input on the County's major issues, assets, and limitations. The significant issues identified during this process were further explored in countywide, topic-specific focus groups. This section outlines the key points from the survey. The detailed survey results are located in the Appendix.

According to County officials, one of Seneca County's greatest strengths is its educational opportunities. In addition to strong public and private schools, the County is home to two colleges: Heidelberg College and Tiffin University. Another strength is the nature of the County's citizenry. Seneca County residents were described as hardworking and dedicated individuals who have strong roots in their communities. Conversely, officials identified the County's weaknesses including an inadequate road system, lack of industrial employment opportunities, insufficient local shopping and retail, and inadequate land use planning.

In describing the development pressures in the County, officials indicated conflicts between farmland and residential and industrial growth. Growth and economic expansion was desired, but with minimal conversion of prime farmland. Officials wished to ensure adequate infrastructure before development occurred and to maintain the rural character of the County. Planning on a regional basis was cited as the best way to manage growth. They also recognized the need to cooperate and coordinate planning efforts with neighboring jurisdictions.

While County officials were in favor of growth, they stated a desire to avoid strip development along County and township roads. This type of development was acknowledged to cause traffic and safety issues. Instead, more compact development in existing urban areas or areas with appropriate infrastructure was preferred to minimize land consumption. The implementation of growth management techniques would also help preserve significant natural and historic features such as the Sandusky River corridor, County parks, and historic municipal downtowns.

Overall, County officials' goal for this planning process was to identify issues, discuss concerns, and reach consensus on matters where competing interests were involved. Officials also indicated the need for a long-range plan that would guide future growth into sound development patterns.

## **CITIZEN INPUT**

### **ATTITUDE SURVEY**

The attitude survey was developed to gain the community's perspective on many of the same issues addressed in the County officials survey. Results indicated that Seneca County's officials are mostly in agreement with the attitudes of County residents. As with the officials, citizens of the County found the region's two colleges to be significant strengths. They also stated that Seneca County's agricultural base and engineering department were positive attributes. In contrast, weaknesses included the lack of improved state highways, uncontrolled growth, lack of interjurisdictional cooperation, and law enforcement. Citizens and officials alike acknowledged that the encroachment of development on farmland is a critical County issue.

The County officials survey and the citizen attitude survey helped to identify major issues in Seneca County. From these results, five major areas of concern became the topics for countywide focus groups.

### **FOCUS GROUPS**

In June 2000, residents of Seneca County facilitated and participated in focus groups aimed at exploring several plan-related topics more deeply. Participants addressed a series of questions on one of five topics: economic development, intergovernmental relationships, farmland preservations, urban growth / growth management, and community services. The following sections are brief summaries of the process results.

#### ***Economic Development***

Seneca County was described as having average economic health. While there is a lack of large industries and major employers, there are a great number of smaller industries with high technology jobs. The economic climate of the County is one where most families must have

dual incomes to make ends meet. However, the County's economy was characterized as "up from the bottom" from where it was in the 1980's.

Two factors that have contributed to recent economic progress are the presence of two colleges in the County and the cooperation amongst all agencies and levels of government. Heidelberg College and Tiffin University have made positive impacts by providing educational and employment opportunities. Also, the relationship between County agencies and governmental bodies has had a positive economic impact. Continued cooperation is critical to further economic objectives and to increase communication with County residents and potential new industry leaders.

Conversely, the County's transportation network and school systems were cited as the main problems negatively affecting economic development. It was agreed that the quality of the schools and transportation system had an impact on industry decisions to locate in the area.

When asked to identify what types of commercial and industrial growth should be encouraged in the County, citizens favored smaller "locally owned" types of development. However, it was also recognized that the location of any industry should be encouraged. Furthermore, the use of an apprentice program to train employees could be beneficial by encouraging both technical training and 4-year degrees. The County should make use of existing areas by encouraging planned growth and redevelopment of brown fields, and industries should be located along the rail system to make better use of existing infrastructure. Furthermore, development should be concentrated close to cities and not spread into highly productive farmland.

According to the focus group participants, the parties responsible for economic development in the County include the Seneca Industrial & Economic Development Corporation (SIEDC), the commissioners, mayors, County engineers, and utility companies. There was a recognized need to be more aggressive in attracting business; however, there was an acknowledgement that highway constraints pose a significant economic development limitation. Another concern was the balance between planned growth and economic reality. The idea of planned growth is that all entities should be included in the process of determining where new industries locate. However, the economic reality of the situation is that local entities do not always have control over where a particular industry locates. In order to promote positive economic growth countywide, there should be a cooperative understanding between all agencies, citizens, and public officials so all parties can be involved in new industry proposals.

Finally, the group identified ways to enhance economic development in the County. These included social goals of strengthening the family unit and instilling a better work ethic in young people, as well as physical improvements in the road system and farmland preservation. Additionally, the group felt existing businesses should be supported to a greater extent and that tax incentives for new businesses are a necessary evil in order to compete with other municipalities.

### ***Intergovernmental Relationships***

A group consisting of public officials from the County, cities, and townships discussed the issue of intergovernmental relationships. Major issues of countywide concern include farmland preservation, water quality issues, and the impact of regulations on smaller villages and rural areas. One common water quality concern was ground source pollution due to failing septic systems.

Group members felt that past cooperation between different branches and levels of government was strained, but over the past three to five years, major improvements had been made. Areas of opportunity for continued intergovernmental cooperation include an intergovernmental working agreement, industrial growth, infrastructure, and the use of Issue 2 monies for roadwork and regional planning. Other areas of cooperation cited include working as partners with various privately owned utilities such as Ohio American Water Company, Rural Electric, and others.

The group also indicated that all political jurisdictions should work together on growth issues. Growth could be managed through brown field renovations and effective use of land use planning and zoning. Group members stated that “growth should be a win-win situation” and that government should not “reinvent the wheel” when handling growth issues. Finally, suggestions for enhancing intergovernmental relationships were the creation of a regional planning newsletter and greater use of the website.

### ***Farmland Preservation***

Focus group members defined prime farmland using both qualitative and quantitative standards. They indicated prime farmland is profitable and consists of loam soil with good drainage and level topography. These qualities must also exist in sufficient quantity, estimated by the group to be over 25 acres, to be considered prime. Agricultural uses in the County consist of traditional crops such as corn soybeans, wheat, alfalfa, hay, and oats as well as vegetable crops, horticultural uses, and livestock production.

The group indicated that there are some uses that are compatible with agricultural uses, namely residential. However, not all types of farming are compatible with residential uses, a leading example being hogs. The group was asked to consider whether non-agricultural uses should be prohibited in agricultural areas. Participants were hesitant to impose prohibitions, indicating that landowners should be able to determine the use of their property within the framework of local zoning regulations. When questioned as to possible minimum lot size requirements, several participants reiterated their concern over the rights of property owners. The only consensus was that a minimum lot size should be established that was necessary for a leach bed.

Recognizing agriculture as integral to the economy and character of the County, prime farmland should be preserved. Methods of preservation included the use of restrictive wills, trusts, government programs, and keeping farms in the family. Capital gains taxes and tax

abatement were cited as factors that negatively impacted rural areas. Additionally, urban redevelopment might help to stop encroachment and pressure on prime farmland.

Several problems related to the implementation of a farmland preservation plan were identified. Two of these were funding issues and the buyout of development rights by private corporations that may seek to prohibit farming. Other concerns were lack of respect for private property rights and lack of support for agriculture among the citizenry.

### ***Urban Growth / Growth Management***

Seneca County faces a number of growth-related issues. When asked to identify issues and problems related to growth in the County, the group cited farmland issues as a hot topic. Of prime concern was the construction of new housing in farm areas. Drainage issues, watersheds, and sewer tiles were also seen as important growth issues. The group felt zoning in the townships must be upheld in order to counter potential growth problems.

The group cited growth management as a means to plan ahead for growth and prevent the further environmental degradation of the land. One growth management strategy is to limit public services to areas of compact growth. However, the focus group felt that rural areas do need resources, and fire and security services should be provided to them. There was consensus that services should be provided except in cases where it was not financially feasible. Proper zoning requirements are also advantageous in managing growth.

It was recognized that growth comes with certain costs associated with the provision of infrastructure and services. The County sees increased traffic as one reason for the increased costs of growth. The group felt the responsibility of paying for growth should lie with the government or by establishing a tax base. Another solution could be that developers could pay for the services and then recoup the money when the project sells. The buyers would also maintain the financial support. Currently, new homeowners are carrying the weight of tax issues.

The group cited changing laws, new officials, and township opposition to growth as impediments to managing growth. Another barrier to implementing growth management strategies are citizens' "not in my backyard" attitudes. Other obstacles include difficulties in revitalizing or rebuilding old buildings and determining which parties have responsibility or control. However, given the citizenry's concern about loss of prime farmland and land conversion, growth management will be a valuable tool as the County faces development pressures in the future.

### ***Community Services***

Generally, service provision within the County was viewed positively. However, the group recognized a growing need to meet increasing demands with fewer resources. Concern was expressed that the public does not understand the limitations in services that the government can provide. Specifically, new rural residents expect services to be offered at the same level as they are in town, such as the availability of parks and recreation opportunities.

The need for public support was indicated by the group, which cited as an example the failure of a County levy that prevented the County park district from upgrading and improving the park system. School funding was also an important concern, as the schools are seen as focal points of the community. According to the group, all of the schools--public, parochial, college, and university--need to be promoted.

## DEMOGRAPHICS

Population, growth rates, and the socioeconomic characteristics of a County’s inhabitants are inseparably linked to its demographics. The analysis of these factors creates a greater understanding of the influences that affect the livelihood of the County. Furthermore, population data can assist the County in determining its economic, educational, transportation, employment, and recreational demands.

### POPULATION

The 2000 US Census provided the most recent population figure for the Seneca County. According to the Census, the County’s population was 58,683, a population decrease of almost two percent since 1990. In contrast, the State of Ohio experienced a growth rate of nearly five percent during the same time period. Table 2.1 illustrates the population census figures for 1950 through 2000 in Seneca County. This data will later be used in this analysis to calculate population projections.

**Table 2.1**

Year	Population	% Change
1950	52,978	--
1960	59,326	12.0 %
1970	60,696	2.3 %
1980	61,901	2.0 %
1990	59,733	-3.5 %
2000	58,683	-1.8 %

Source: ODOD, Department of Strategic Research

Table 2.2 indicates the populations for Seneca County’s largest municipalities based on the 1990 Census and the 2000 Census. According to this data, the two largest cities—Tiffin and Fostoria—have been losing residents. The remaining villages in the County have had a wide distribution of population growth and loss since 1990.

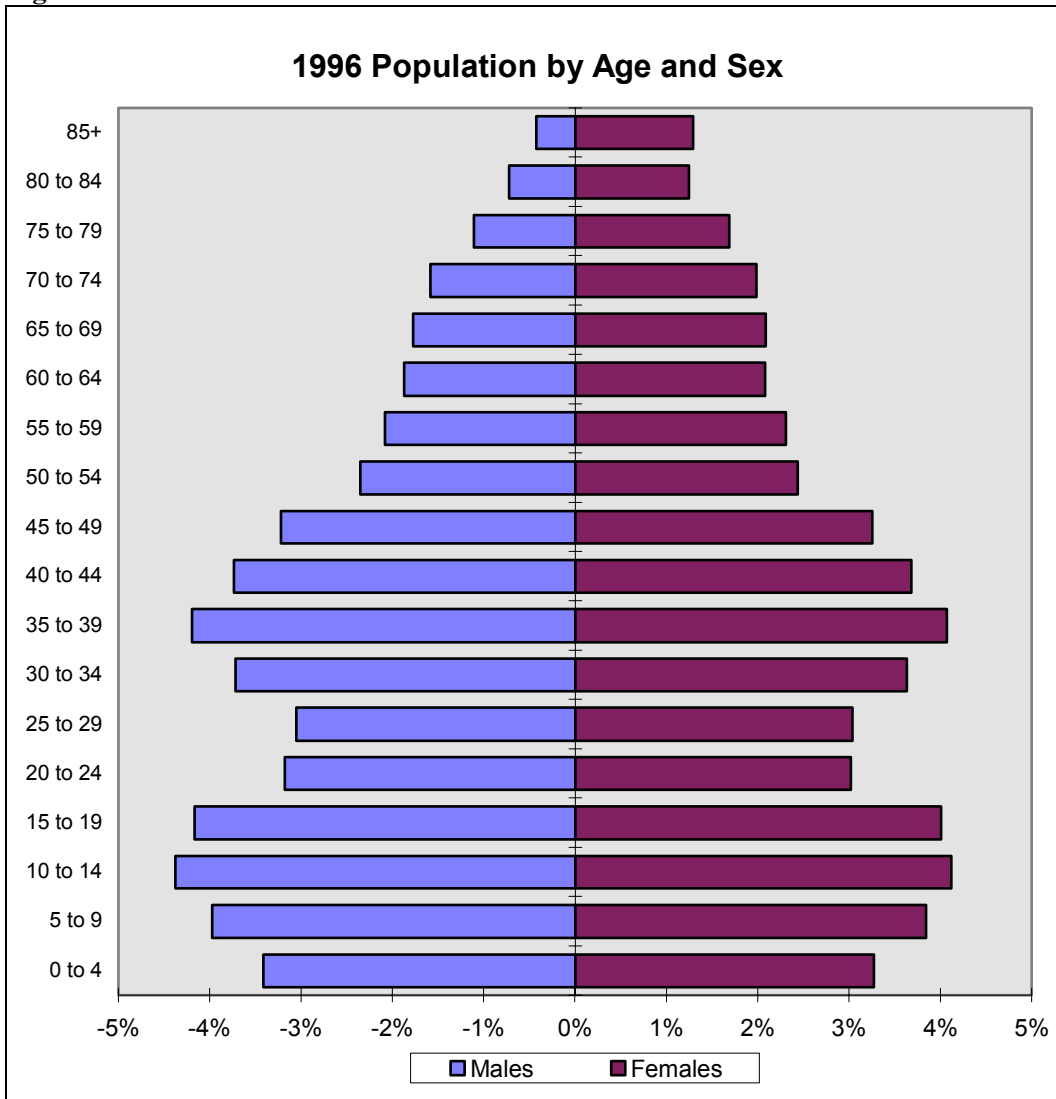
**Table 2.2**

Largest Municipalities in Seneca County			
	1990	2000	% Change
Tiffin city	18,604	18,135	-2.5 %
Fostoria city	10,836	10,035	-7.4 %
Bloomville village	949	1,045	10.1 %
Attica village	944	955	1.2 %
Bettsville village	752	784	4.3 %
Green Springs village	731	648	-11.4 %
Republic village	611	614	0.5 %
New Riegel village	298	226	-24.2 %

Source: US Census Bureau

Seneca County’s 1996 population is shown distributed by age and gender in Figure 2.1. The population pyramid shows a fairly similar distribution in comparison with other counties in the nation. One trend to note is the swell of individuals in their mid 30’s to early 50’s, the baby boomers, and a corresponding swell of their children, ages 5 to 19. Due to the aging of the baby boomers, the elderly population should continue to grow in the next several decades.

**Figure 2.1**

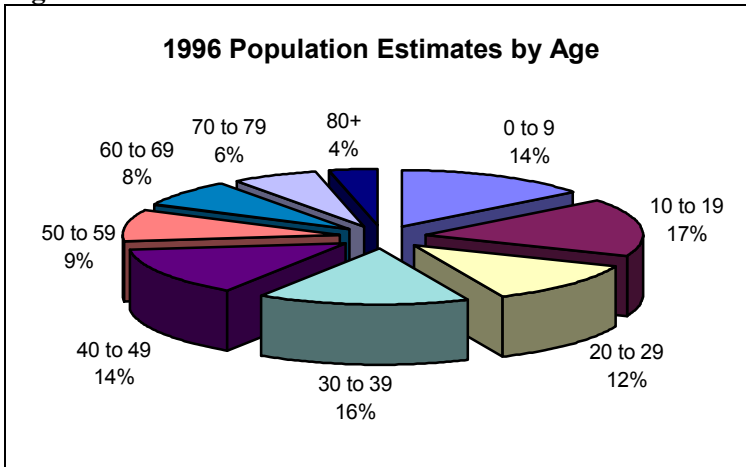


Source: ODOD Office of Strategic Research

The 1990 US Census determined that Seneca County had a total of 21,227 households with an average of 2.71 persons per household. The Census also recorded that the County was home to 15,776 families where a family is defined as two or more related individuals living together. Of these, 13,113 (83.1 percent) were married couples. Approximately half of the married couples had children living with them at the time. Additionally, females headed 12.7 percent of the County’s families. The mean number of persons per family was 3.21.

The age breakdown for 1996 in Seneca County is illustrated in Figure 2.2. The chart shows that the largest age cohorts coincide with the younger age groups, as expected. There is a consistent decline in population following the 30 to 39 age cohort.

**Figure 2.2**



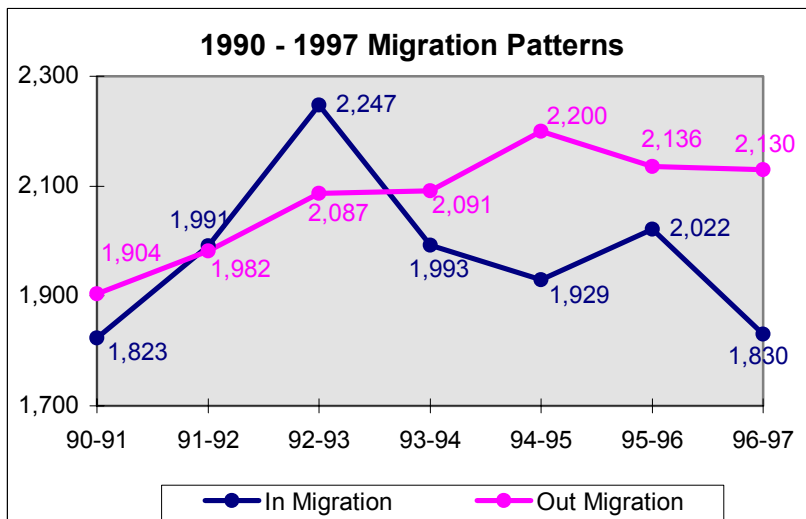
Source: ODOD Office of Strategic Research

### ELEMENTS OF CHANGE

Population change can be caused by three factors: birth, death, and migration. The first two factors combined usually contribute to positive growth as the number of births, in most cases, outnumbers the number of deaths. However, a decline in family size during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and increasing longevity have both contributed to a declining birth rate. There is less predictability in the third factor, migration behavior, which is more variable and not easily foreseen.

Past migration patterns offer some clue as to future population trends in the County. Figure 2.3 depicts in and out-migration that occurred between 1990 and 1997 in Seneca County. Out-migration slowly increased and then leveled off over this time period. However, in-migration has been more inconsistent, rising in the early 1990's and declining later in the decade. In 1997, migration contributed to a net loss of 300 persons.

**Figure 2.3**



Source: ODOD Office of Strategic Research

## POPULATION PROJECTIONS

Population projections are useful tools as they use past and present growth patterns to predict future populations. By having these projected estimates, the County will better be able to anticipate and plan for the needs of a growing or declining population.

Population projections can be calculated in several ways. First, aggregate methods can be used to determine growth of the population as a whole. Examples of aggregate methods include the linear growth model and the constant growth model. Second, the various components of demographic change—deaths, births, and migration—can be dealt with separately. These components are largely independent processes that change by differing amounts at varying times, affecting segments of the population in diverse ways. The method used for this analysis is called the cohort component method.

### AGGREGATE METHODS

The complete process including methodology, data, and formulas used to compute aggregate population projections for this section is located in the Appendix.

### LINEAR GROWTH MODEL

The linear growth model assumes population grows or declines following a straight line with constant slope indicating a constant incremental change. This method can be flawed, particularly in newly developing regions that often experience bursts of growth and increasing incremental change. This method is most appropriate for small, slow-growing regions.

### CONSTANT GROWTH MODEL

The constant growth model inflates the population assuming that relative change remains the same. This method creates a geometric curve where population grows or declines at a constant rate. However, this method does not take into account that growth will inevitably be limited by saturation of land or resource constraints, both physical and fiscal.

Table 2.3 represents the outcomes of both the linear and constant growth population projections. Due to the slow rate of population change in Seneca County, both methods yield similar results. According to the projections, the County's population will fall to approximately 56,600 by 2020.

**Table 2.3**

<b>Aggregate Population Projections</b>				
<b>Technique</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2020</b>
<i>Linear growth</i>	58,158	57,633	57,108	56,583
<i>Constant growth</i>	58,168	57,658	57,153	56,652

## **COHORT COMPONENT METHOD**

As previously stated, the cohort component method uses the three indicators of growth—birth, death, and migration—in determining growth rates. This is a more sophisticated method than aggregate methods because it is able to take into account shifts in the factors of growth over a large area. Cohort component models divide a population into five-year age groups. These models may also divide a population by sex and sometimes race. Because of

**Table 2.4**

<b>Cohort Component Population Projections</b>	
<b>Year</b>	<b>Population</b>
1990	59,733
1995	59,853
2000	58,371
2005	57,214
2010	54,313
2015	52,416
2020	50,749

the relative homogeneity of the population in Seneca County, the population was not broken up into race segments. These divisions are used to isolate population segments that experience significantly different demographic rates from the rest of the population.

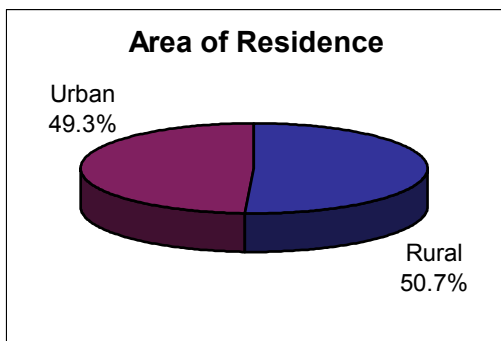
The cohort component projection was calculated based upon the 1990 Census. According to the projection, the population of Seneca County will decrease by 2020. Projection results are shown in Table 2.4. The County’s actual 2000 population was 58,683, which shows that the projection was low by less than one percent.

The complete process including methodology, data, and formulas used to compute the cohort component population projection for this section is located in the Appendix.

## **POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS**

So far, population change in Seneca County has been discussed in general terms and by citing specific changes based on age group and location. To have a greater understanding of the County’s demographics, population should also be looked at in terms of a variety of social characteristics.

**Figure 2.4**



Seneca County has a significant rural population. Figure 2.4 indicates that as of 1990, just over half of the County’s residents lived outside of an urban area.

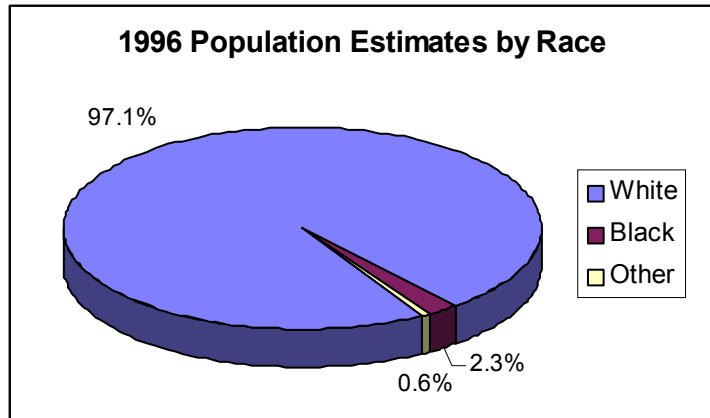
The racial composition of Seneca County is largely homogeneous, as seen in Figure 2.5. Whites comprise 97.1 percent of the population while blacks make up 2.3 percent and other racial groups constitute only 0.6 percent. For purposes of this analysis, persons of Hispanic decent could be of

Source: 1990 US Census

any race. The lack of diversity in the County’s ethnicity is common in communities with strong agricultural sectors.

In 1998, enrollment in Seneca County public schools was 9,888. That year, the graduation rate was about 90 percent while the dropout rate was 3.25 percent. In contrast, Ohio had a 5.3 percent dropout rate and an 86.5 percent high school graduation rate.

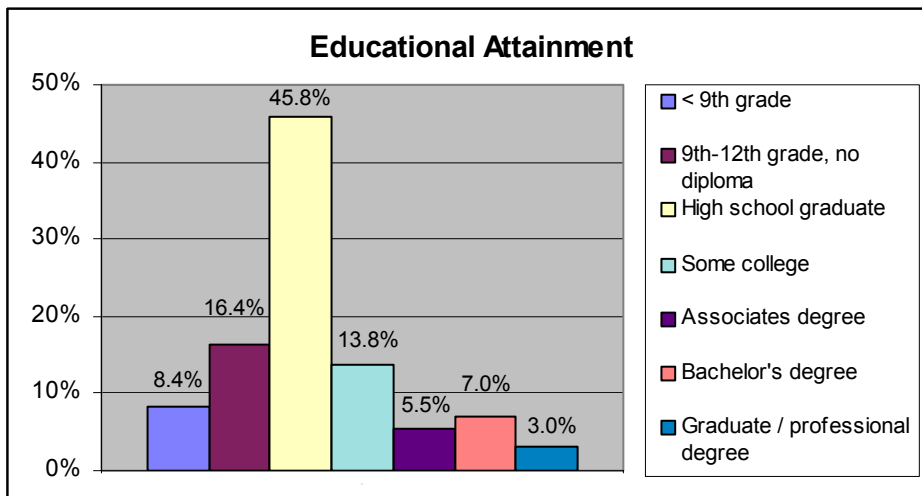
**Figure 2.5**



Source: ODOD Office of Strategic Research

Figure 2.6 indicates educational attainment as reported by the 1990 US Census. Approximately 75 percent of the residents in Seneca County ages 25 and older have graduated from high school. Additionally, almost 30 percent of the County's residents have had education beyond high school. In comparison with Ohio, Seneca County has virtually the same number of persons who have obtained their high school diploma. However, Seneca County has proportionally fewer persons with bachelors or graduate degrees than Ohio.

**Figure 2.6**



Source: 1990 US Census

During the 1990's, dropout rates fluctuated in Seneca County significantly. While steady between 2.2 and 2.7 percent through much of the decade, dropout rates increased in 1996 and 1997 to over five percent. However, in 1998, dropout rates declined by two percent near previous levels.

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## GOALS & OBJECTIVES

# 3

Goals, objectives, and policies for Seneca County were developed as a result of input from focus groups, interviews with local officials, and citizen surveys. Three themes emerged as primary goals of the Plan: Quality of Life, Balanced Growth, and Efficient Services. A focus on these principles will permit Seneca County to accommodate growth while retaining the character and inherent attractiveness so important to the citizens of the County. The following major goal statements and objectives reflect these three themes.

More specific policies and implementation strategies for each goal are detailed in Chapter 9.

**1. Maintain and enhance the standard of living for all citizens of Seneca County.**

- 1.1 Increase the economic development potential of the County.
- 1.2 Provide a range of housing choices for all residents.
- 1.3 Ensure all residents have access to quality open space and recreation opportunities.
- 1.4 Preserve and protect historic sites and structures in the context of their natural settings.
- 1.5 Maintain the rural character of the County.

**2. Encourage growth that focuses upon existing urban areas and respects the intrinsic values of the land.**

- 2.1 Encourage growth that builds upon existing municipalities, and support new residential, commercial, and industrial growth only within identified urban growth boundaries where public infrastructure is available.
- 2.2 Utilize growth management principles.
- 2.3 Preserve prime farmland recognizing agriculture as a viable economic resource.
- 2.4 Protect sensitive environmental areas such as woodlands, steep slopes, endangered species habitats, and native flora and fauna from the impacts of development.
- 2.5 Encourage intergovernmental cooperation and collaboration among political jurisdictions and between governmental agencies.

**3. Ensure timely and orderly development within the County by making strategic public investments in infrastructure and services.**

- 3.1 Preserve the character of existing rural highways and promote a safe and efficient transportation system.
- 3.2 Minimize private and public costs of installing and maintaining public utility lines by limiting service provision to urban growth areas.
- 3.3 Encourage the joint use of all County facilities where feasible.

4.



LAND USE

5.



HOUSING

6.



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

7.



## OPEN SPACE & RECREATION

8.



INFRASTRUCTURE

9.



## STRATEGIC IMPLEMENTATION

10.



APPENDICES