



# Bridging Divides: Opportunities for Connecting Farmers and Underserved Consumers in Chautauqua County, New York



Image Source: Jason Toczydlowski, CHQ Local Food

In March 2015, Chautauqua County, New York was selected as one of eight Communities of Opportunities (COOs) in the country with significant potential to strengthen ties between small- and medium-sized farmers and residents with limited food access. Working with the Growing Food Connections (GFC) project team, county stakeholders have since established a steering committee that has charted a vision for the future of Chautauqua's food system.

This brief, which draws on interviews with Chautauqua County stakeholders and secondary data sources, provides information about local government policy opportunities and challenges in the food system to inform the work of the GFC steering committee and stakeholders in Chautauqua County.

## BACKGROUND

Chautauqua County, the westernmost county in New York state, is home to a strong agricultural base, abundant natural resource amenities, and small-town rural charm. The county sits on the shore of Lake Erie. Two small cities, Jamestown and Dunkirk, and 27 towns comprising the county are dotted with lakes. Natural resources, shown in Figure 1 and 2, provide abundant space for recreational activities such as hiking, biking, boating, skiing, horseback riding, snowmobiling, fishing, and hunting. The county boasts the second highest number of farms in New York state, including half of New York's grape acreage and more Concord grape acreage than in all counties in the United States. A sizeable dairy industry, valuable timber stands, small- and mid-sized vegetable producers, and a large food and agriculture manufacturing industry are integral to the economy.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the history of the county is deeply rooted in the agricultural economy. Dr. Charles Welch built the first grape juice plant in Westfield in northern Chautauqua County.<sup>2</sup> Nearby Fredonia is home to the nation's first Grange Hall, established in 1868 and still operating today.<sup>3</sup>

Today, Chautauqua County faces a shrinking and aging population, declining industry and manufacturing, and stagnant low household incomes. Nearly 20,000 people have left the county over the last 40 years, reducing the population to 133,556.<sup>4</sup> The unemployment rate for the county is approximately 6.1%, consistent with the New York state average, but is significantly higher (18%) for young people and minority populations.<sup>5</sup> In line with the rest of the rustbelt region, the county experienced a loss of manufacturing jobs and a steady decline in the percentage of the labor force employed in the manufacturing industry.<sup>6</sup> Unemployment also varies seasonally, being higher in winter months and lower in summer months.<sup>7</sup> The education and health-care industries, similar to statewide averages, employ the



largest percentage of the workforce (27.7%), and manufacturing jobs comprise 17.4% of employment, significantly higher than the statewide average of 6.6%.<sup>4</sup> Employment in agriculture, forestry, and fishing in the county (2.5%) is also higher than the statewide average (0.6%), positioning the county to leverage food and agriculture as a form of economic development in response to the stagnant manufacturing and industrial economy.

The poverty rate in Chautauqua County has risen steadily over the last 15 years. Nearly 20% of the population lives below the poverty line, and the percentage of families in poverty is higher for families with children younger than five years old (37.1%) and for single mothers with children younger than five years old (67.4%).<sup>4</sup> The median household income for the county (\$42,429) is well below the state median (\$58,003).<sup>8</sup> Although home ownership is common (69.1%), the median value of housing units (\$83,500) is also significantly below the state median (\$288,200).<sup>8</sup> The county is 94% white, but there has been a recent minor demographic shift. Hispanic and Latino people comprise 6.8% of the population, a proportion that has slightly increased in the past two decades.<sup>8</sup> Black people comprise 2.7% of the population.<sup>8</sup> Other minority groups include growing Amish communities and a small Native American population.

### FOOD SECURITY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Food insecurity is a pressing concern for many residents in Chautauqua County. Estimates suggest that in 2014, 13% of the county’s population (17,300 residents) was food insecure.<sup>9</sup> Food insecurity is highest among senior citizens, people living on bordering reservations, and minority populations.<sup>10</sup> Over one-third (34.79%) of students in the county are also eligible for the National School Lunch program.<sup>11</sup> Community stakeholders report that people with limited or fixed incomes struggle to afford nutritious food.

#### Challenges

Numerous challenges exacerbate food insecurity in Chautauqua County, and these challenges differ for residents living in the cities of Jamestown and Dunkirk, compared to those living in more rural areas. Lack of income and transportation contribute to food insecurity for both rural and urban populations in Chautauqua County.

Physical access to healthy produce and full grocery stores is especially difficult in some areas of the county. Particularly in the more remote rural areas, small grocery stores are less likely to have fresh produce options. Roadside farm stands in these areas provide access to fresh, affordable options in the summer months but are closed during the off-season.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, access to culturally acceptable foods for the Hispanic and Latino populations living in Jamestown and Dunkirk is limited.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to limited physical access to food, community leaders report lack of access to personal or public transportation, rather than the shortage of stores, as the largest barrier to food security in Chautauqua County. Community leaders report that rural senior citizens who are no longer able to drive and low-income

families without dependable vehicles are especially at risk of food insecurity.<sup>14</sup> USDA data from 2010 suggest that 2.54% of the population, or 1,379 residents, in the county does not have access to a car and lives too far from a grocery store.<sup>15</sup> Within the urban communities, walking and biking to grocery stores are dangerous in areas with no sidewalks and unplowed streets during the winter.<sup>13</sup>

Although many people qualify for federal safety-net programs, community stakeholders report that residents lack knowledge of program availability, eligibility requirements, and application processes. Social stigma towards participation in federal programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is also prevalent and especially strong among senior citizens, dissuading them from applying for programs designed to assist them.<sup>14</sup> The full participation of eligible people in federal safety-net programs is essential for decreasing food insecurity.<sup>14</sup>

#### Opportunities

Despite these challenges, the county has the opportunity to leverage its local resources, networks, and traditions to promote food security. Through planning and implementation efforts, the Chautauqua County Health Network (CCHN) has led efforts to increase access to healthy food retail within the food-insecure parts of the city of Jamestown.<sup>16</sup>

Numerous civic organizations are currently combating hunger and food insecurity through a vast network of food pantries and other social safety-net programs. The St. Susan Center runs a soup kitchen in the city of Jamestown, and additional food pantries are supported by the Food Bank of Western New York. Chautauqua County Rural Ministry (CCRM) offers cooking and nutrition classes, community garden space, and emergency food support in addition to other human-needs services.

In addition, the county has a rich tradition of residents acquiring their own food through growing, hunting, and fishing as well as sharing food with neighbors and the community at large. Within the city of Jamestown, interest in community gardens is growing as well and is supported by the Jamestown Renaissance Corporation (JRC), a public-private organization. CCRM partners with Cornell Cooperative Extension and numerous area farmers to organize the Chautauqua County Gleaning Project. The project has harvested over 650,000 pounds of food since 1999 in an effort to decrease both food insecurity and food waste. Three deer-meat processors in the county partner with the Venison Donation Coalition to process deer free of charge for hunters who are willing to donate the meat to the Food Bank of Western New York.

### AGRICULTURE: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Agriculture is a significant component of the county’s economy and contributes strongly to county residents’ sense of place. Protecting farmland, maintaining the rural landscape, and protecting the agricultural resources and economy are top priorities for the county’s government.<sup>17</sup> The number of farms (1,515) is the second highest in New York state,<sup>17</sup> but the average



*Chautauqua County is known for extensive grape acreage in the northern part of the county (left) and numerous dairy farms in the southern part of the county (right).*

Image Source: Jason Toczydlowski, CHQ Local Food

size of 156 acres is below the statewide average of 202 acres.<sup>18</sup>

The county's farmers grow a diverse range of agricultural products. Fruit and tree-nut farming far outweighs other types of farming in the county, with 467 out of the 1,515 farms dedicated to the production of fruits, including peaches, cherries, and grapes.<sup>19</sup> A warmer microclimate, created by the escarpment of the Allegheny Plateau colliding with Lake Erie, also forms ideal conditions for growing grapes.<sup>17</sup> Chautauqua is the number-one producer of grapes in the state and the number-one producer of a specific variety, Concord grapes, in the entire nation.<sup>17</sup> Dairy and beef cattle farms, not dependent on warmer temperatures, also comprise a large portion of the farms in the southern half of the county, where the microclimate is less present.<sup>19</sup> About 13% of farms also sell their products directly to consumers through the county's four farmers' markets, produce auctions, and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shares.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to food production, the county's economy includes some food processing for grapes and dairy products. The National Grape Cooperative, known more commonly as the Welch's brand, has a processing plant in the county. Additionally, 21 wineries create value-added products on the 17,000 acres of land under grape production.<sup>17</sup>

### Challenges

Although Chautauqua County has abundant natural resources that support the agricultural sector, farmers face several challenges. Barriers to markets, price fluctuations in commodity crops, and a shortage of labor significantly reduce profits and income for the multitude of small- and mid-sized farms. The average net cash farm income in the county is only \$29,990,<sup>21</sup> which implies that the average net income from the farm for farm families is only slightly higher than the federal poverty line for a family of four.<sup>22</sup> Even though the majority of Chautauqua farms are not earning a significant income, slightly over half (54.3%) of principal farm operators consider farming their

primary occupation. For principal farm operators earning sufficient incomes, finding affordable health care and health insurance is difficult. Too often, Chautauqua County's farm families depend on jobs off of the farm. The low incomes of farm families in Chautauqua County warrant further attention. Yet, it is particularly difficult to assess how many farm families fall into this category given the wide range of gross farm sales. Farms making less than \$1,000 in gross sales account for almost one-quarter (23%) of all the farms, indicating the presence of hobby farms, subsistence farms, and land yielding little production. Although 58 farms in the county gross more than \$500,000 in sales, nearly two-thirds of the farms report gross sales of \$25,000 or less.<sup>23</sup> The low sales volume prevents farmers from changing their farming model, diversifying crops, or making infrastructure investments because they do not have the startup money to begin the modernization process.<sup>10</sup>

The lack of regional infrastructure investments also negatively influences Chautauqua County farmers. Outside of the grape- and milk-processing facilities, there are few places to process local produce and meats. The lack of grain mills and humane slaughtering facilities with modern artisanal butchers leaves farmers traveling five or more hours to have animals processed.<sup>10</sup> The average estimated market value of agricultural land and buildings per farm in Chautauqua County (\$322,390) is below the New York state average of \$525,587, indicating the numerous small farms but also a lack of significant infrastructure investments on the farms themselves.<sup>18</sup>

Although over 3,000 people in the county work as hired farm laborers, supported by 277 migrant workers,<sup>24</sup> labor shortages are a significant concern for many farmers. Farmers report too few people in the local labor supply willing to work in manual-labor jobs for the wages that farmers are able to pay.<sup>13</sup> The H-2A visa program that supplements the local labor pool with seasonal migrant workers can be useful for seasonal harvesting of produce and grapes but is of little use for dairy farmers in need of reliable year-round labor.<sup>13</sup>



Several of the challenges for farmers in Chautauqua County mirror national trends and originate outside the county. Fluctuating commodity crop prices in the dairy and grape industries create unstable investment opportunities for farmers hesitant to purchase new equipment if commodity prices are low the next year.<sup>13</sup> The federal regulatory environment is prohibitive given the low sales volume.<sup>13</sup> At the local regulatory level, high property taxes on agricultural land are particularly problematic.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Chautauqua County farmers are aging, as the average principal farm operator in the county is 56 years old.<sup>26</sup> Facilitated discussions between land owners whose land is no longer in production and young farmers looking for land, particularly young farmers coming from regions where land is significantly more expensive, could provide key connections for continuing production on viable agricultural land and decreasing development pressures on strategically located farms.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to farm-business challenges, the loss of farmland is a significant concern for Chautauqua County. Development pressures on farmland, timber stands, and vineyards have resulted in an increased rate of farm decline compared to the state as a whole. In particular, disconnected land parcels far from the base farm operations decrease efficiency.<sup>13</sup> Between 2007 and 2012, Chautauqua County experienced a 9% decrease in its number of farms, much higher than the 2% decrease statewide.<sup>18</sup> Although the number of farms decreased, the number of acres of farmland (236,546) slightly increased, by 688 acres during the same time period.<sup>18</sup>

### *Opportunities*

Farms in Chautauqua County are uniquely positioned to take advantage of numerous opportunities. A large percentage, nearly three-quarters of the land in the county, has rich, high-quality soils. Only 34% of the total land in the county is under production, presenting an opportunity for increasing farming in high-quality soils.<sup>28</sup> Chautauqua County farmers also have the opportunity to expand their markets. The market value of products sold from Chautauqua County has experienced a 28% increase in value between 2007 and 2012.<sup>18</sup> Continued expansion is possible by tapping into both local and regional markets, particularly customer demand created by summer tourist destinations such as the Chautauqua Institution, which is a high-end niche market.<sup>12</sup>

Already a summer tourist destination, Chautauqua County has leveraged its agricultural assets through a growing agritourism sector. The popular Lake Erie Wine Trail runs through the northern part of the county and into Pennsylvania, and is bolstered by educational displays at the new Grape Discovery Center, planned and built in part through public funding. In addition to state funding provided to the Grape Discovery Center, the local agritourism center has received funding through the county's Occupancy Tax Grant program.<sup>29</sup> Agritourism is also extending the summer tourist season, through the popularity of fall corn mazes, pumpkin picking, cut-your-own Christmas tree ventures, and events such as March for Maple, a celebration highlighting the 19 direct marketers of maple products.<sup>20</sup> Further agritourism development, demonstrated through places like the Grape Discovery Center, along popular hiking and driving routes

with grand views could draw a diversified tourist crowd.<sup>25</sup>

Infrastructure investments in community kitchens and processing facilities could increase the potential for institutional purchasing by schools and hospitals.<sup>12</sup> The county is strategically situated between several larger markets, such as the cities of Buffalo, Pittsburgh, and Cleveland. Taking advantage of its location within these larger regional markets could diversify market options and provide an outlet for increased value-added products.<sup>14</sup> Assistance with marketing, such as a branding campaign for products from the western New York region, would relieve farmers of the burden of marketing their products.<sup>10</sup>

### LOCAL GOVERNMENT PUBLIC-POLICY ENVIRONMENT

Chautauqua County is fortunate to have local governments engaged in protecting and supporting their valuable agricultural assets while providing opportunities for access to healthy and affordable food for low-income families. Chautauqua County is governed by a county-wide government that is home to 17 smaller municipal governments and 27 township governments. In addition, 18 school districts and 21 special district governments contribute to the 84 total governments operating within the county.<sup>30</sup> The local government has responded to efforts by community-led civic organizations and private entrepreneurs to leverage its natural and agricultural resources to strengthen the food system.

Community-led efforts to improve the food system include the pilot implementation of a Healthy Corner Stores initiative, initiatives to accept EBT, SNAP, and Double Up Food Bucks at farmers' markets, farm-to-institution programs, and the creation of community and school gardens. Funding secured by the Chautauqua County Health Network (CCHN), through a New York State Creating Healthy Places to Live, Work, and Play grant and, more recently, a Creating Healthy Schools and Communities grant, has supported staffing for healthy community initiatives. Additionally, private entrepreneurs such as CHQ Local, a small-scale food aggregation business, have begun innovative efforts to procure healthy foods from local farmers for area restaurants and customers.

The local government has partnered on many of the community-led efforts described above. The Jamestown Renaissance Corporation (JRC), for example, a public-private partnership established in 2006 focused on revitalizing Jamestown, runs several programs focused on food. JRC supports a downtown farmers' market that features local produce and has made a significant effort to increase accessibility to the market for people of all income levels. For example, the JRC offers discounted public transit fares for residents who use public transportation to visit the farmers' market. Expansion of payment options at the downtown farmers' market has led to the market having one of the highest SNAP redemption rates in the tri-county area. Concerted effort to respond to the needs of customers has steadily increased the number of people purchasing healthy food directly from local farmers. JRC also supports community gardens, by leasing privately owned land for three community gardens and renting garden beds to residents for modest annual fees.



The Chautauqua County government also has numerous policy and planning initiatives that impact the food system. Two government-sanctioned, county-wide planning projects directly address food and agriculture. The Chautauqua 20/20 Comprehensive Plan, created by the Chautauqua County Department of Planning and Economic Development, the Chautauqua County Planning Board, and the Legislative Comprehensive Plan Task Force, provides dedicated guidance to food and agriculture as a part of the local economy. Direction for this section of the plan was informed by members of The Agriculture/Foods Focus Group, who outlined 11 policy actions, including strengthening agricultural districts, supporting local right-to-farm legislation, and implementing agricultural zoning. Although several of this comprehensive plan's recommendations can promote agricultural viability, they offer limited strategies for alleviating food insecurity in the county.<sup>17</sup> Chautauqua also has a county-wide, comprehensive Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan, adopted in 2000, which outlines protection of farm and forest land, support for farming as a profitable industry, and retention and development for agribusinesses in the county.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the county participates in the state's first agriculturally inspired heritage management plan, the Concord Grape Belt: Heritage Area Management Plan (2010), funded by New York state, which outlines strategies for preserving the region's grape heritage and industry along the shores of Lake Erie. Some of these initiatives, including the creation of the Grape Discovery Center, receive support through Chautauqua County's 5% occupancy tax on hotels/motels, which helps to fund the county's protection of lakes and streams and local tourism efforts.<sup>29</sup> Shoring up and implementing existing plans are essential for strengthening food-systems planning efforts throughout the county.

## IDEAS FOR THE FUTURE

Gifted with natural resources, a culture of resilience, and committed to its agricultural heritage, Chautauqua County is uniquely positioned to cultivate a model rural community food system. With support from its community leaders, Chautauqua County can demonstrate how rural counties can create a policy environment where agriculture thrives and residents lead full, healthy lives. Key ideas for future policy and implementation efforts to strengthen food systems are outlined below.

### *Development of County-Wide Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan to Adopt a Systemic View of the Food System*

The county's agriculture and farmland protection plan offers a tremendous opportunity for strengthening the county's food system. The plan is expected to be updated in the near future. Traditionally, such plans focus largely on farmland protection, yet experience from across the country suggests that farmland can be best protected if it is part of a thriving local food system. The updates to the Chautauqua County plan could explicitly address innovative strategies for strengthening the local food system. Such a plan would address the county's food system: A food system is the soil-to-soil system that enables the production, processing, distribution, acquisition, and consumption of food, and includes the management of excess food and food-related waste. A well-functioning and well-integrated food system would enhance the environmental, economic, social, and nutritional health of Chautauqua County.

Numerous rural counties across the United States, including Douglas County, Kansas,<sup>31</sup> Cabarrus County, North Carolina,<sup>32</sup> Marquette County, Michigan, and Cass County, Iowa,<sup>33</sup> are using innovative public-policy strategies and may offer potential ideas. Moreover, the future plan has the potential to guide public investments in the food system so that economic returns to the county are amplified.

### *Reform in Property-Tax Policy*

Farmers in the region are hindered by high property taxes, which vary across the towns within the county and are even higher than in other parts of the region. Individual parcels of farmland that are in or outside a state-certified Agricultural District can be eligible for an agricultural value-assessment program that allows property taxes to be adjusted based on agricultural values.<sup>25</sup> Leaders in the agricultural community point to the need for further policy support to help farmers navigate the land-assessment process and decrease expenses related to land taxation. Agricultural property taxes set at a fair rate in relation to what farms actually produce on the land could relieve undue financial burdens on farmers.<sup>25</sup>

### *Workforce Development Support*

Curiously, a labor shortage (in agriculture) and unemployment both exist in Chautauqua County. The labor shortage for farmers must also be addressed in a way that provides decent jobs for people looking for good employment and that matches well-trained employees with farmers looking to hire. The local government can play a key role in reducing the labor shortage and unemployment gaps in the county. Although some suggest that potential employees no longer want to work hard (as required in farming), this perspective may simply illustrate a disconnection between potential employers and employees. Community leaders report that the labor shortage lies not in too few people seeking a job and willing to do hard work but in the scarcity of people experienced in running heavy equipment, milking animals, and doing farm labor.<sup>13</sup> In addition, fewer youth have experience in these tasks, and few local schools offer technical training in these areas. Workforce-development programs facilitated by the local government in partnership with local organizations can identify the specialized skills required for agriculture and recruit, train, and match well-qualified employees with local farmers.<sup>13</sup>

### *Information Dissemination*

Streamlining the provision of information and resources for food-systems businesses, including farmers, food processors, and food retailers, will create a more favorable environment for the food and agriculture sector to thrive. For example, the geographic separation of federal, state, and local agencies that address agriculture creates fragmented information and disconnected programming in rural areas. Organizations such as the USDA and Cooperative Extension previously shared centralized offices in the county but now are in different locations. For farmers seeking information regarding taxes and permitting, expanding markets, environmental issues relating to farming, and business startup models, having to visit multiple offices creates disjointed and inefficient information sharing.<sup>13</sup> Local government agencies



could create one-stop shops (including virtual information centers) to ease the regulatory burden on the agriculture and food-system sector.

#### *Infrastructure Development and Enhancement*

The local government can also amplify the extraordinary work of its agriculture and food industry by investing in infrastructure. Infrastructure investments to ensure the long-term sustainability and success of farmers' markets, such as an indoor winter market space, are a priority.<sup>25</sup> The lack of processing and aggregation facilities is a reported challenge for farmers interested in scaling up to institutional sales and small-batch value-added production. Local government investment in a food hub that includes cold storage, flash freezing, meat and produce processing, a community kitchen, and retail space would catalyze entrepreneurial activity in the food system.

Investments in public transportation to existing grocery stores, to improve food access, may alleviate food insecurity. Connecting current public transportation lines to urban retail hubs and creating more bike- and pedestrian-friendly environments surrounding those locations would provide opportunity for low-mobility people to access healthy food.<sup>14</sup> The local government could also combine its efforts to promote food access with efforts to support the local agricultural industry. For example, grocery stores (that are better connected through public transportation) could be encouraged and incentivized to stock and sell locally grown produce.

#### *Recognizing and Celebrating Local Food Businesses*

Chautauqua County has an outstanding share of committed food-business entrepreneurs, including farmers, food retailers, and food distributors that move food from field to table and contribute to the county's economy. With organic farm operations such as Abers Acres, aggregators such as Chautauqua Local Foods, the Chautauqua Produce Auction, and Brigiotta's Farmland Produce and Garden Center, family-operated grocers that serve urban (Farm Fresh Foods) and rural populations, Cassadaga Shurfine, and farmers' markets, Chautauqua has the bones of a strong food system. One way to amplify the work of these businesses is to create an online local food-business directory that enables local residents and visitors (including to the Chautauqua Institution) to locate, frequent, and support local businesses.

### RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

Information in this brief is drawn from multiple sources. Quantitative data sources include the 2014 American Community Survey (ACS) five-year estimates and the 2012 US Census of Agriculture. Qualitative data include 15 in-depth interviews with representatives of various sectors of the food system as well as Chautauqua County policymakers and staff. Interviewees are not identified by name but are, instead, shown by the sector that they represent, and are interchangeably referred to as interviewees or stakeholders in the brief. Interviews were conducted from April 2015 to March 2016. Qualitative analysis also includes a review of the policy and planning documents of Chautauqua County, which were reviewed for key policies and laws pertaining to the food system, and a review of the minutes of the Growing Food



*CHQ Local Food offers a non-traditional Community Supported Agriculture model of food delivery baskets sourced from regional farms and small processors.*

Image Source: Jason Toczydlowski, CHQ Local Food

Connections steering-committee meetings.

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Figure 1. Chautauqua County is located along Lake Erie in western New York.

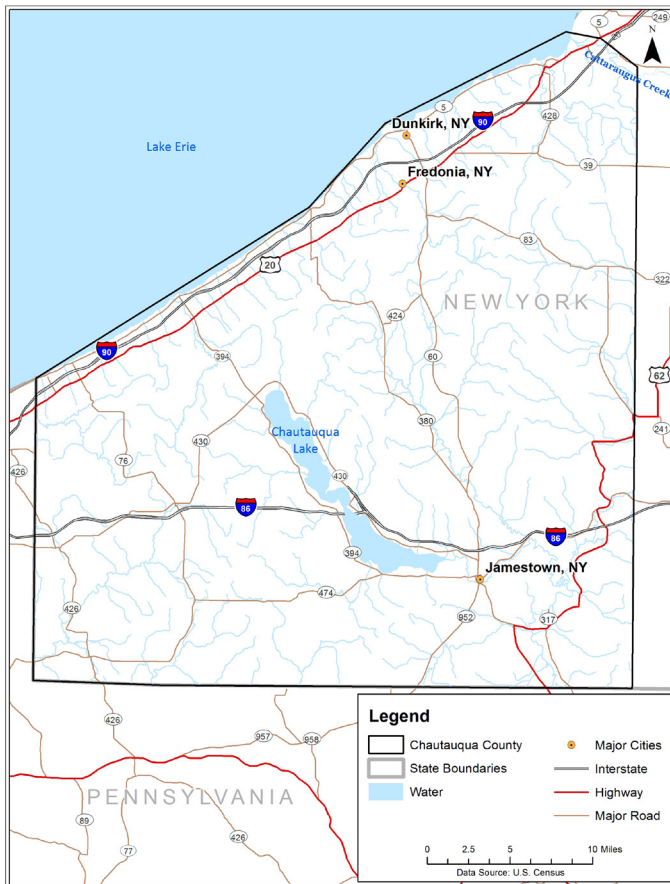


Figure 2. Chautauqua County is rich in natural amenities such as Chautauqua Lake that provide opportunities for outdoor recreational activities.

GROWING FOOD CONNECTIONS PARTNERSHIP

PROJECT LEAD



PROJECT CO-LEADS

American Farmland Trust

cultivating healthy places



PROJECT PARTNERS



American Planning Association  
Making Great Communities Happen

GROWING FOOD CONNECTIONS  
Community of Opportunity Feature

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