

Ken-Ton Bee Article
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TONAWANDA SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVE

In recent months, the Town of Tonawanda has embarked on two initiatives that will continue to improve the quality of life in our community. As cornerstones of the 'Tonawanda Sustainability Initiative', the E3 program and the Tonawanda Opportunity Area (TOA) will promote the growth of existing and new businesses, while improving our environment.

This article will frame the issues we seek to address through the 'Tonawanda Opportunity Area' (TOA)'.

While the southern and central sectors of our waterfront are dominated by large industries, the northern sector is an area with great potential for new development consistent with sustainable growth principles.

In the early and mid-1900s, farm land was acquired for industrial development in the northern sector – from the Grand Island Bridge to the City of Tonawanda border. New parcels were generally long and narrow to facilitate the flow of raw materials and production inland from the river's edge.

A handful of large facilities were constructed – most notably the Ashland Oil refinery – along with several smaller distribution terminals along River Road. River Road itself was built as a high-speed, four-lane highway up to the City of Tonawanda border – with plans to continue through the city to join another major highway.

Various factors led to a halt in development plans. Changes within industries led to the closure of the Ashland refinery and many of the distribution terminals. Vacant lands remained vacant, as plans for new construction were shelved. River Road was never extended, as residents of the City of Tonawanda raised concerns about the destructive impact on their community.

The result was an area in transition for many years.

Beginning in the 1980s, however, the Town of Tonawanda set a new direction for the northern sector, changing waterfront zoning districts to promote office and light industry activities. Erie County developed Isle View Park along the river's edge, as well as the Riverwalk path. Several planning studies followed, each building on the goal to integrate economic development with the natural beauty of the Niagara River.

A major step was taken in 2003 as a private developer, TM Montante Development, purchased approximately 185 acres of vacant land, and established Riverview Solar Technology Park. Riverview is considered New York's first "solar-ready" business park. The developer retained the natural beauty of the site and has successfully linked solar project development to investment in park. In 2010 our Town drafted new legislation, the first in New York State, to promote the production of solar energy.

Although tremendous potential exists to promote sustainable development in the northern sector, there are several barriers that must be removed before potential turns into reality.

Long, narrow properties must be assembled and reconfigured to meet the needs of developers. Studies must be commissioned to assess the environmental condition of any given property to secure financing. Infrastructure must be built to provide access to new sites.

A well-coordinated and collaborative effort of public and private sector partners, as well as residents, is necessary to identify and remove these barriers to development, resulting in new economic activity and improved air, water and land quality for residents.

The state-sponsored 'Tonawanda Opportunity Area' provides an opportunity to achieve our goals. In doing so, we join other communities throughout the state in using this tool to advance our goals for a sustainable community.