Old Town Neighborhood Plan

July 2010

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Section I – Physical Setting

Section 1.1 - Geography

The Old Town Neighborhood in the Town of Tonawanda, NY is located along the Niagara River approximately 7 miles North of downtown Buffalo, NY. The neighborhood comprises approximately 310 tax parcels on 10 blocks over 64.25 acres of land. The neighborhood is surrounded by the General Motors-Powertrain Plant, Frederick Law Olmsted's Riverside Park (City of Buffalo), and the Niagara River.

Western New York has historically been a strategic location for American, British, French, and Native American people. It was originally the gateway to the Western Frontier and Canada for immigrants that arrived through the ports of Boston and New York City. In its early industrial and commerce days, the port of Buffalo was a critical waterway port that allowed access to inland markets. Today, the region continues to serve as a major international border crossing with Canada and has a regional metropolitan population of approximately 1.1 million people.

Below is a map that illustrates the regional setting of the neighborhood.

Figure 1 – Old Town Neighborhood Regional Locator Map

Being adjacent to the City of Buffalo in the area of Riverside and Black Rock presents its own set of issues and opportunities for the future. The Town of Tonawanda and the City of Buffalo will continue to collaborate on several issues affecting this neighborhood. Criminal activity, land use policy, economic development programs, and street improvements are examples of issues that need cooperation and to be understood by the responsible agencies of each jurisdiction.

Old Town's location is one of the critical reasons why it requires special attention compared with other areas of the Town of Tonawanda. It is the only waterfront neighborhood within the Town that has spectacular views and contains neighborhood assets that position itself for a vibrant future. Because of its relatively small size and isolation from the rest of the Town, it is often "forgotten" by a majority of the other town residents. It has a separate zip code from other areas of the Town and does not have a local newspaper circulation that is the same as the Town of Tonawanda or Village of Kenmore. This has contributed to a sense of isolationism.

Below is a location map of the neighborhood with a detailed view of the existing street pattern that is the scope of this planning study.

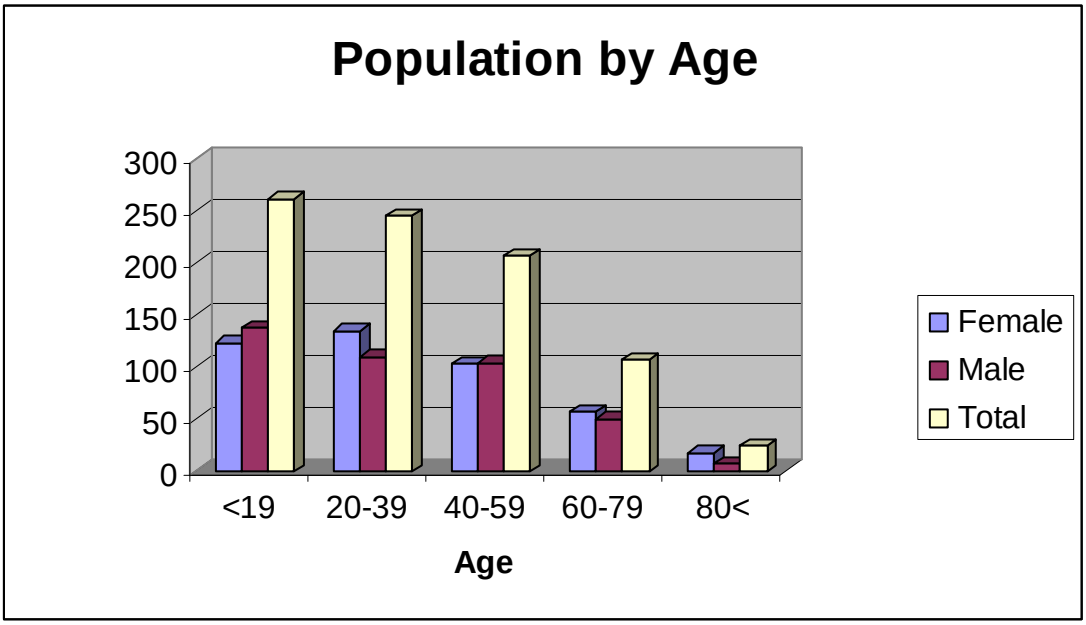
Figure 2 – Old Town Neighborhood Study Area

Section 1.2 Demographics and Housing

There are approximately 845 people that reside in the Old Town Neighborhood according to statistics published by the U.S. Census Bureau. In the Census 2000 Block Group Racial Data for Old Town, the demographic profile showed residents were 94% White, 2.9% Black, 2.7% Hispanic, 1% American Indian, and 1% Asian.

Approximately 86.3% of all residents were born in New York State. There are only 2.3% of residents who were foreign born. Another 11.4% of residents were born in another state within the United States of America.

The population is evenly divided among age groups and shows a healthy balance between young and older residents. The following chart illustrates the age characteristics of the neighborhood.



There were a total of 402 housing units counted in 2000. Of those units, 185 were owner occupied and 172 units were renter occupied. 357 units were occupied and 45 units were considered vacant (11.2%). More recent statistics from the U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development and the U.S. Postal Service show that the neighborhood has an overall vacancy rate of 8.1%.[1]

Approximately 83% of the housing supply was built prior to 1959. There were 59 homes (14%) built between 1960-1979 and another 13 units (3%) constructed after 1995. A typical home may contain 3 bedrooms(38%). A typical apartment unit may contain 2 bedrooms(35%). There were 75 dwelling units that contained 4 or more bedrooms(18%).

[1] Data was compiled by the United States Postal Service under contract with the U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development. The data is available at http://www.huduser.org/datasets/usps.html

The rents are very reasonable with 54% of rental units paying less than $350 per month and another 38% of the units that pay between $350-$500. There were 44 homes (30%) that do not have an outstanding mortgage.

Section 1.3 - History

The neighborhood originally grew out of the need for manufacturing workers during the 1910-1925 timeframe although some houses were built along the Niagara River and Vulcan Streets as early as 1850. Most of the earliest homes were built to provide housing and commercial services to those traveling along the Erie Canal (Now the I-190).

The completion of Riverside Park by the City of Buffalo, under the direction of Frederick Law Olmstead, certainly made the area attractive for a large number of immigrant settlers to the area. Mainly Serbians and Middle Easterners inhabited the first homes and boarding houses that were constructed in the neighborhood. The area grew in popularity as the new professional baseball team from the City of Buffalo enjoyed practices at Riverside Park in 1898.

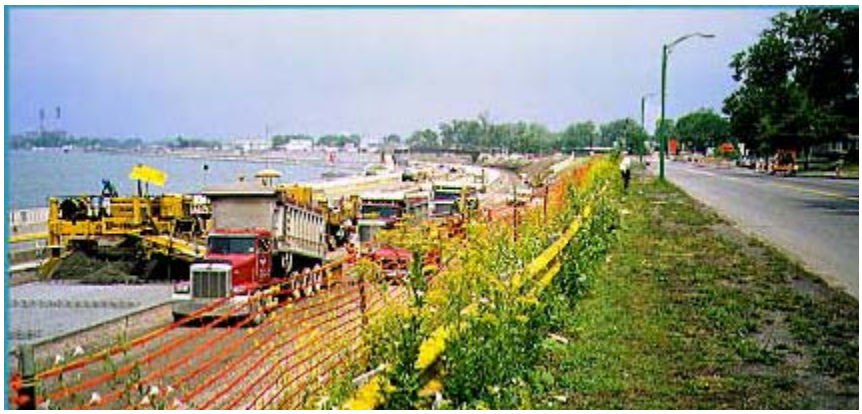
The small church still standing at Grover Place and Riverdale Avenue was the result of several Village of Kenmore families who wanted to introduce religion to the growing population along the Erie Canal. Originally, the "Riverside Mission" included services from 4 different denominations from the Kenmore area. The local community pooled together enough resources to begin a small congregation of about 150 people called the United Brethren Church in 1912.

The current Town Boys & Girls Club that stands at 54 Riverdale Avenue was at first an elementary school that was built for Consolidated School Districts No. 2 & 3 of the Town of Tonawanda in 1920-1921. It was named the Warren G. Harding Elementary School.[1] It was sold by the Ken-Ton Union Free School District in 1956 to the Town Boys Club. In 1968, the "Club" changed its name to the Town Boys & Girls Club and currently operates one of the largest school age recreational programs in the County.

The businesses in the area have mainly prospered as a result of the General Motors/Chevy Powertrain Plant located at 2929 River Road. Built in 1937, the manufacturing facility has a long history of providing for jobs for local families for generations. During the 1950's, the manufacturing facility employed thousands of local workers. Currently, the facility employs 800 local employees. Globalization of the auto industry and technological improvements in assembly have led to less demand for labor at the plant.

[1] Silsby, Robert, Settlement to Suburb: The History of the Town of Tonawanda, 1997, pg. 54.

The Erie Canal was the area's economic engine and crucial link to the more prosperous East Coast Cities of Boston, New York, Washington D.C., and Philadelphia. The viability of the Canal began to decline with the advent of commercial trucking and by the late 1920's had become obsolete. The NYS Thruway Authority filled in the Erie Canal in 1958 to become part of the Interstate Highway System which is now the I-190.



Section II – Public Participation

Section 2.1 – Existing Plans

Town-wide Comprehensive Land Use Plan –

In December 2005, the Town of Tonawanda Town Board adopted a town-wide comprehensive plan. The plan establishes long-term goals and objectives for town government to strive for over the next 50 years. These vision statements summarize the broad brush direction of the Town and lead the way when beginning to discuss neighborhood level plans. The goals of the Town comprehensive plan are as follows:

- The Town will strive to maintain a high quality of life and high level of services for its residents.
- The Town will work to ensure the continued vitality of its neighborhoods.
- The Town will strive to be a safe community.
- The Town will retain a well-maintained, diverse stock of neighborhood residential properties that meets the needs of all residents.
- The Town will promote attractive and well-planned economic opportunities.
- The Town will promote a safe and efficient transportation system for all modes of transportation.
- The Town will support increase municipal cooperation where appropriate.
- The Town supports the preservation of environmental features and the continued mitigation of environmental concerns.
- The Town will supply a well-maintained, cost-effective infrastructure system that provides good roads, ample safe public water, proper wastewater treatment and effective storm water management together with other utility service to support sustainable land use and economic development.

5-year Consolidated Plan for HUD

The Town has continued to pursue the objectives listed above and in the HUD 5-year consolidated plan by continuing to invest primarily in our three Preservation Districts which include Sheridan-Parkside, Kenilworth, and Old Town. The Town has continued the removal of uninhabitable and not suitable for rehabilitation housing units. The Town has also invested heavily in infrastructure and general public improvements that are modernizing outdated and underperforming utility systems.

The Town is continuing the creation of new affordable quality housing units for first-time homebuyers. From 1994-2008, the Town has constructed 100 new housing units with our Community Housing Development Organization partner and with federal and state assistance from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and New York State Department of Housing and Community Renewal. The Old Town neighborhood saw 11 new homes constructed through this new construction program. The Town built the other homes in the Sheridan-Parkside(31) and Kenilworth(58) Neighborhoods.

The Town will continue its new housing program into 2009-2010 and will continue to implement its vision established in the comprehensive plan. It is important to remain committed to those who have pioneered in the Home Ownership for Parkside's Enhancement (H.O.P.E.) Program and believe in the future plans for the neighborhood.

Sheridan-Parkside Village Courts Redevelopment Plan-

In September 2003, the Town Board accepted the findings of another neighborhood planning effort, the Sheridan-Parkside Village Courts Redevelopment Plan, and made it part of the Town-wide comprehensive plan. In a similar fashion, this plan is designed in accordance with the overall vision established in the Town-wide comprehensive plan. It is intended to be made a part of the comprehensive plan as a focused redevelopment effort and realistic means to achieving the goals established in the plan.

Black Rock – Riverside Good Neighbor's Planning Alliance Neighborhood Plan-

In the City of Buffalo, the North Riverside and BlackRock Residents have created a neighborhood level plan in conjunction with the City's Office of Strategic Planning. As the area is adjacent to Old Town, many similar themes can be drawn between the two communities. Among these are keeping crime rates low, maintaining an affordable, decent housing stock, and providing efficient city services.

Riverside Park is the major recreational facility for the Old Town Neighborhood and it is also listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Its history and future use will have a great impact on the quality of life for residents of Old Town. Also, the commercial corridors of Vulcan, Niagara Street, and Tonawanda Street are directly linked to the health of Old Town. It is important to collaborate on issues of mutual concern such as improving accessibility to the waterfront and providing for regional bike paths. Adjoining land use patterns must be consistent in how they are administered to make sense of the common boundary area of the neighborhood.

Erie County's Framework for Regional Growth-

In October of 2006, the Erie County Legislature adopted the principles as set forth in the area's first Regional Plan since 1972. It is a set of policy principles that will ultimately guide future County investment in infrastructure and guide them in administering local land use policy. It is important to understand the Town of Tonawanda's place in the region to formulate land use goals for its redevelopment.

Section 2.2 – Public Survey & Meetings

PURPOSE OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD SURVEY

Public participation in the planning process is critical to any successful redevelopment effort. Neighborhood residents need to care about their surroundings and the future direction of the neighborhood. The neighborhood survey that was conducted throughout September & October of 2008 offers the residents' perspective of the needs of the Old Town community. The results of the comments received from interested residents and business owners provide the Town Office of Community Development (CD) with a good framework from which to work.

SURVEY SAMPLE

The sample area and range included all Old Town addresses that the Town has on file. This included all 403 renters and property owners of Old Town. The neighborhood surveys were sent out during the first week of September 2008. The CD office also set up a web survey for those people who preferred to respond by computer through the website service SurveyMonkey. A map of the survey area is shown in figure 1 on page 2.

The Office of Community Development accepted responses until the second week of October 2008. A total of 38 responses were received; thirty (30) by standard U.S. mail and eight (8) via the website survey. Twenty-nine (29) surveys were returned due to vacancy. This number corresponds with an approximate 8% vacancy rate that HUD has been reporting through the United States Postal Service (USPS).

SURVEY DEVELOPMENT

The survey questions were developed with the assistance of the Old Town Steering Committee. It entailed six questions that were geared to measure priority in assigning future resources. The first three questions were designed to be open-ended to allow respondents to offer any comments they wanted on the positives and negatives of their neighborhood. The next two questions were designed to rank neighborhood issues to gain a more accurate measure of where the residents stood on key issues. The survey is attached to this report as Appendix A.

SURVEY RESULTS COMPILATION

The results were compiled throughout the first two weeks in October 2008. On October 23, 2008, a public meeting was held with neighborhood residents to discuss the results. The CD office also took that opportunity to conduct a goals setting session to begin to piece together the framework for the redevelopment plan. Many comments were received and are included in this section.

The first question of the survey asked residents, "What are the best qualities about your neighborhood?" The following responses were given in order of magnitude:

- Great neighbors that care about their property and that know one another. (Small-Town Atmosphere/Pride of Ownership) **55%(21)**

- Town services are very good including Highway, Sanitation, Water, Sewer, Parks, Police, and Fire. (Cleanliness) **45%(17)**

- Proximity to the Niagara River, Great Views, Close to Riverwalk, Riverside Park (Olmstead Park System) **42%(16)**

- Quiet **18%(7)**

- Convenience to Downtown/Thruway System/Transit (NFTA) **16%(6)**

- Quality of Education(Ken-Ton Schools/Holmes Elementary) **16%(6)**

- High quality of existing housing and the new single-family homes **13%(5)**

- Low Crime Rate **11%(4)**

- Low Taxes & Affordable Housing **8%(3)**

- Having the Boys & Girls Club **3%(1)**

The second question of the survey asked residents, "What are your biggest concerns about the neighborhood?" The following responses were given in order of magnitude:

- Criminal activity including drugs, drunks, & thieves **58%(22)**

- Absentee property owners, boarding houses **47%(18)**

- Youth from the Boys & Girls Club, people from Riverside **32%(12)**

- Shabby commercial properties, number of bars **21%(8)**

- No off-street parking, local traffic patterns **18%(7)**

- Antiquated infrastructure, water, sewer, street lights, sidewalks **18%(7)**

- Truck traffic on Vulcan St, traffic light at GM & River Rd. **8%(3)**

- Smell/Noise from GM **8%(3)**

Several comments were unique, only being mentioned by one respondent. They are as follows: roaming cats, the condition of the Boys & Girls Club, trees not being maintained, poor park maintenance, a deteriorated fence at Irene Street.

The third question on the survey asked "What would you like to see happen in your neighborhood?" The following responses were given in order of magnitude:

- Continue to demolish older homes and build new single-family **58% (22)**
- Increase crime awareness and police presence **29% (11)**
- Better code enforcement and maintenance of properties **16% (6)**
- Improvements at the Boys & Girls Club **13% (5)**
- Improvements throughout the commercial businesses along Vulcan Street, Tonawanda Street, & River Road **13% (5)**
- Better sidewalks, roadways, and traffic flow improvements to allow 2-way traffic along some 1-way streets **11% (4)**
- Better park maintenance **8% (3)**
- Coordinate redevelopment efforts with GM and other businesses **8% (3)**
- Provide more street lights and better street tree maintenance **8% (3)**
- Provide more resources to rehabilitate the existing housing stock **8% (3)**
- Eliminate the multi-family housing **8% (3)**
- Decrease the number of bars in the area **8% (3)**

There were several suggestions for future improvements that were unique and are listed here for your review:

- Have a local newspaper circulation (Ken-Ton Bee, and Metro Source community papers do not deliver to the14207 zip code area)
- Improve the sewer and water infrastructure
- Increase the overall property value for all property owners.
- Stay like it is

The fourth & fifth questions on the survey were designed to measure different opinions on neighborhood issues. The fourth question asked residents to rate the following issues by providing a score from 1 (Bad) to 5 (Great). The results are as follows:

Housing	**3.09**
Transportation/Access	**3.92**
Sidewalks/Bike Trails	**3.53**

Parks & Recreation	**3.43**
Community Center	**2.54**
Commercial Businesses	**2.64**
Street Trees/Lights	**3.51**
Neighborhood Identity	**3.36**
Water & Sewer Infrastructure	**4.24**
Highway Department Service	**4.30**
Police Services	**3.89**

The results showed a more positive rating for town services in general, but showed a more negative rating for the Town Boys & Girls Club and the commercial business area of the neighborhood.

The fifth question on the survey asked the residents if they either supported or would be against several community development initiatives. The results of the survey are as follows:

Approve/For	Issue	Disapprove/Against
36	New Single-Family Homes	**1**
5	New Multi-Family Homes	**32**
27	More or Different Businesses along Vulcan Street , River Road	**9**
29	More Park & Recreational Areas	**8**
27	Additional Street Trees/Benches along River Road, Vulcan Street, Tonawanda	**10**
27	New or Different Street Lighting	**7**
30	Building & Grounds Improvements at the Boys & Girls Club	**7**

These results emphasize the support for the existing community development programs in the neighborhood to construct new single-family homes. There was a strong opposition for any multi-family housing in the neighborhood as poor property maintenance is a big issue for most residents.

Several people surveyed offered a number of comments on their neighborhood. They are listed here for informational purposes:

- Aqua Lane Park is pathetic
- The Town Boys & Girls Club looks unfriendly
- My biggest hope & dream is to get out from beneath the investment I have made & move into a much more desirable neighborhood & Town.
- Boarded up houses are a problem. Once they are boarded up, there is no further action taken such as auction or demolition.
- The park on Roswell & Grover needs better lighting and possibly cameras. There appears to be frequent drug trafficking at night there.
- Tear the Boys & Girls Club down
- Place a stop sign at Tonawanda Street & Edgar to control vehicles entering & exiting GM.
- Since moving to the area, Riverdale & Roswell are starting to look like the East side of Buffalo.
- The sanitation pickups are just great. The police service is outstanding. Whenever we call they're there in minutes. Some sidewalks need repair.
- I've lived here 55 years. I like it here. I'll be happy with whatever the people decide.
- Not being able to park on your own front lawn is stupid, we all pay our taxes.
- I would like to see the Boys & Girls Club move to Buffalo. Tear it down and build houses.

Several neighborhood meetings were held throughout the planning process. An informational meeting was held on July 17, 2008 at the Boys & Girls Club to discuss the planning process and another open public meeting was held on October 23, 2008 to discuss the results of the Old Town Neighborhood Survey. Also, several meetings were held with a steering committee made up of local residents, business owners, and town officials throughout the development of the plan to refine the ideas presented by the general public and the Office of Community Development.

Section III – Goals of the Redevelopment Plan

Section 3.1 – Old Town will continue to be a close knit community with neighbors who know each other and care about the neighborhood.

Throughout the community, the overriding positive aspect the residents cited was that it has a small town feel, and that everyone knows each other. This aspect of the community must be preserved and enhanced in every way. There are a number of things that can be done through physical planning to neighborhood planning that can add value to the social networking patterns already occurring in the neighborhood. This section outlines those activities and physical improvements to the neighborhood that will ultimately continue this tradition of community building.

The central location of most community oriented activities occurs at the Boys & Girls Club building located at 54 Riverdale Avenue. This facility was built as an elementary school in 1920. It now serves the neighborhood as the local teen recreational center and hosts several community groups for meetings.

The maintenance of the building has been deferred over the years due to a lack of funds. Currently, the building and grounds need repair. At a minimum, there would need to be a total window replacement in the structure along with a modernization of the exterior grounds. Cost estimates are approximately $500,000 to complete just those two items. Officials at the Boys & Girls Club of the Northtowns are collaborating with the Town on several of these potential projects.

After the maintenance issues are addressed, the building will remain the magnet for neighborhood organization and activity. It will continue to function as the center of the neighborhood.

There is one small neighborhood park located at Grover Place and Roswell Avenue. This park is mainly utilized by families with small children. There are several pieces of small playground equipment as well as a few benches with garbage disposal. The overall size of the park measures 88’ x 132’ in area. The park is located at an intersection and is highly visible, but some neighbors have complained about it being used for drug dealing and general teenage loitering.

Other than Riverside Park in the City of Buffalo located immediately South of Vulcan Street, the Grover Place Park is the only neighborhood park accessible by Town residents. It will be important to keep the park open and useable for all residents of the neighborhood. Any safety issues can be addressed through increased lighting at night and more patrols by the Police Department.

Parks play an important role in maintaining social networks for the neighborhood. They provide a safe clean area for residents to exchange information and network regarding neighborhood issues. They are a critical element to maintaining neighborhood identity and meeting the primary objective of the neighborhood of keeping a close knit community by knowing who your neighbors are.

To encourage more pedestrian travel in general and provide a safe and efficient pedestrian transportation network, there are a number of improvements that will need to be made along the streets of Old Town. The sidewalks have to be repaired or replaced in several areas. Details are illustrated in section 3.2. Overall, by providing safe, clean sidewalks that are well lit, it will encourage more pedestrian travel and build more neighborhood ties.

Area block clubs or neighborhood watch groups must be encouraged to continue to meet and stay active. Not only do these groups pass along information to each other that encourage a safer neighborhood, but it also allows for furthering social activity and neighborhood networking. The block club & neighborhood watch group must be provided a safe, clean facility in the neighborhood to meet. They also need support from Town Departments to interact with the group in order to pass along information that is valuable to the group.

The neighborhood groups may also consider establishing a neighborhood logo or other decorative signs to help further establish a neighborhood identity. Currently there are two entrance signs for the neighborhood. One sign is located at the intersection of Tonawanda and Vulcan Streets while the other is at River Road & Edgar Avenue.

The neighborhood block group may want to create a neighborhood marketing methodology that will increase exposure and investment in the neighborhood. Different methods of marketing the neighborhood redevelopment plan will be explored after investment objectives and timelines have been identified.

Section 3.2 - Old Town will invest in its infrastructure and services to ensure continued vitality of the neighborhood.

A 1984 Needs Assessment conducted for the Town of Tonawanda showed that the water and sewer infrastructure in the Vulcan and River Road area was a high priority replacement objective. Only sporadic replacements have occurred along Edgar Avenue and Tonawanda Street. Another 25 years of age on the other underground infrastructure is cause for concern.

The Town is now taking steps across the entire Town to address the aging infrastructure problems it has. A Critical Water System Master Plan was completed in 2008 that identified priority areas to begin the replacement of the system. A capital improvement fee was added to all users in the system to help pay for the costs of replacing and upgrading the system over time. It is intended that State and Federal agencies will offer assistance for older urban areas to replace infrastructure as well. This local capital improvement program is a good faith effort at addressing the aging infrastructure problems within the community and will hopefully leverage additional state and federal funding.

Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding is available to assist infrastructure investments in low-moderate income neighborhoods. Old Town qualifies for federal aid and a local Capital Improvement Program (CIP) has been established to target these critical infrastructure systems in conjunction with road and sidewalk reconstruction.

Below is a table of the roadways to be targeted for complete reconstruction upgrades including waterlines, sewerlines, stormwater lines, sidewalks, street lighting, and landscaping improvements:

Project Description	Time Frame	Agency	Cost Estimate
Riverdale Avenue	1-5 yrs	Town Highway/CD	$1.8M
Vulcan Streetscape	5-10 yrs	ECDPW/CD	$1.2M
River Rd. Streetscape	1-5 yrs	NYSDOT/CD	$.95M
Roswell Avenue	5-10 yrs	Town Highway/CD	$2.1M
Irene Street Ext.	5-10 yrs	Town Highway/CD	$350K

Two of the major infrastructure projects will need to be coordinated with the NYSDOT and the City of Buffalo, because they involve multiple jurisdictions. A map identifying all of these projects is shown below.

During the Streetscape projects along Vulcan and River Roads, the Town should look to extend the bike path that links Riverwalk to the Old Town Neighborhood. Currently, the path ends at Vulcan Street from the Niagara Street overpass. The bikepath should keep its current configuration and run north to Edgar Avenue or the GM Powertrain Facility entrance off of River Road.

Neighbors have expressed a high regard for current town services throughout the planning process. Police, Highway, and Water & Sewer facilities all received high marks for service. The current service programs should be continued in future years at the same level they are at. There will be some additional work needed by all departments during reconstruction of Riverdale and Roswell Avenues.

Section 3.3 – Old Town will continue to be a safe and quiet neighborhood.

The number one concern listed by residents of the neighborhood was the fear of criminal activity including thieves, drug activity, and intoxicated persons from the numerous bars in the area.

The current neighborhood watch group provides good information for area residents about criminal activity and also provides a good communication link with the police department about any neighborhood concerns. It will be imperative that the Town continue to fund and operate the Community Policing Program to allow for continued interaction and involvement with the community group. Effective communication is a critical element of preventing crime and the neighborhood watch group provides a network of active residents interested in maintaining the integrity of their neighborhood.

There are certain actions that the Town can take in terms of physical planning that can help deter criminal activity and assist law enforcement personnel with their mission. There are several areas of the neighborhood that need additional street lighting to prevent dark spots along pedestrian paths and roadways. A street lighting plan for the entire neighborhood will need to be fully implemented with the cooperation of National Grid. Sufficient neighborhood lighting acts as a criminal deterrent.

A new street link from Irene Street to Vulcan Street can improve neighborhood circulation and prevent criminal activity from the commercial facility that is currently located at the dead end on the South Side of Irene Street. Proper street design will ensure that an adequate buffer remain between the commercial activity on Vulcan to the residences along Irene Street. New entrance lighting and safe pedestrian design elements in the street extension design will be provided.

Many residents expressed a desire for increased surveillance of certain areas of the neighborhood. Most of the concern involved the commercial intersections of Tonawanda and Vulcan Street, Vulcan Street and River Road, as well as Grover Place Park near the Town Boys & Girls Club. Methods of increased surveillance will be discussed through the neighborhood watch group.

A number of residents also complained of the lack of response from the City of Buffalo Police Department regarding youth from the Boys & Girls Club facility leaving the club activities. This issue will continue to be explored with the Police Department personnel from both the Town & City as well as officials from the Boys & Girls Club.

Section 3.4 – Old Town will continue to provide a well-maintained and diverse stock of residential properties that meet the needs of all residents.

The quality of the residential properties in the area varies greatly from one property to the next. Overall the median age of housing is approximately 70-80 years old. There are approximately 403 residential addresses located in the Old Town neighborhood. About 250 properties are still owner-occupied, while an additional 150 are rental units. The types of housing units vary greatly as well. Several 3-4-unit buildings are interspersed throughout the primarily 1-2 unit neighborhood. The neighborhood is also home to several organizations such as the Police Club, Town Boys & Girls Club, The Serbian Club, and a small church.

Commercial enterprises are operating mainly along the perimeter of the neighborhood on Vulcan Street, River Road, and Tonawanda Street. There are a couple of older auto repair businesses located on some interior neighborhood lots located off of Edgar Avenue.

There is an existing code enforcement program that targets chronic dilapidated properties as well as those with visible code violations. The aim of the program is to clean up as many properties as possible to increase the overall value of the neighborhood. The program is administered through the Office of Community Development in conjunction with the Building Department. NYS certified Code Enforcement officers from both departments regularly patrol the neighborhood and cite property owners that have either a state or local code violation. The owner is then given an opportunity to address the violations before further enforcement action is taken. If no progress is made by the property owner, then the owner is issued a local court appearance ticket for resolution before a Town Justice.

There are several tools that aid in the Code Enforcement Program. The Code Enforcement Officers are currently using a complaint tracking system that allows them to properly report and track violations. They also have a GIS database that assists them with property owner information. In the future, the Office of Community Development in conjunction with the Building Department will work on building more housing information into the GIS database to be able to better track housing quality issues.

Better information on housing quality will assist the Community Development Office in its administration of the acquisition/demolition program in the neighborhood. By knowing where concentrations of good or poor quality homes are located will assist the office in targeting limited funds into a specific area of the neighborhood to build value and private investment opportunities.

The GIS database system can be expanded to include information on the exterior condition of the property, duration of vacancy, updated owner or responsible party contact information. The goal of the expanded GIS system is to better track housing quality and better respond to any issues that arise in the neighborhood. The system could use data currently provided by the Real Property Assessment System offered through the New York State Office of Real Property Services.

The Acquisition/Demolition Program that has been operating with funds from the U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development since 1994 and has been very well received by the neighborhood. To date, the Town has demolished 11 dilapidated 1-3 unit structures and built 11 new single-family homes for income eligible first-time homebuyers. Although the program is still in its early stages, the new structures are proving to help with reinvestment in the neighborhood.

The program will continue to target those properties that cannot be realistically rehabilitated. If the property in question has rehabilitation costs that exceed 70% of the value of a similar unit in standard condition, then it is not considered economically feasible for the residential rehabilitation program. It would be a better candidate for the voluntary demolition program.

The Town will actively pursue improving property values through the Community Development programs run through the Community Development Office. The neighborhood plan shown in figure 4 illustrates how the Town intends to produce high quality affordable housing units through the acquisition/demolition program.

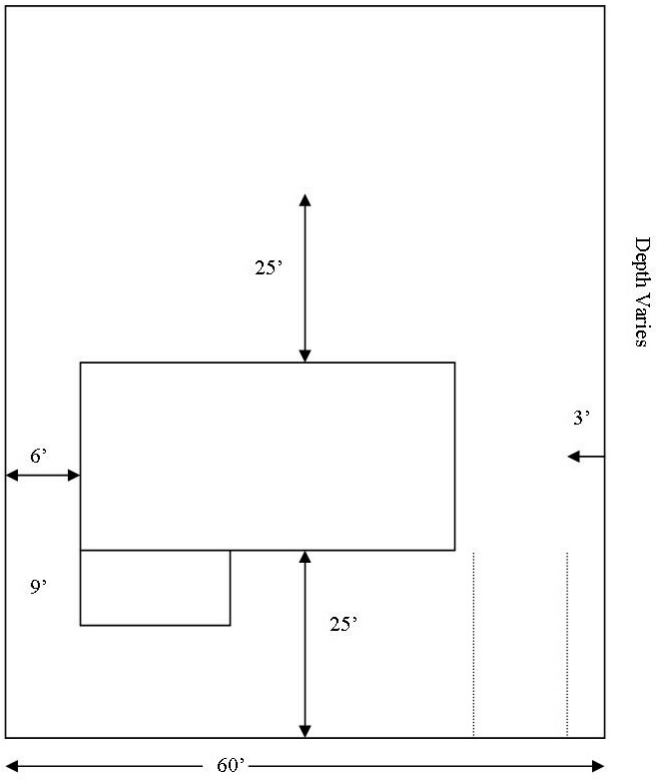
Figure 4 – Neighborhood plan showing primarily 60' wide lots as a preferred alternative

The plan combines several of the narrower 30-33' lots in the neighborhood into a more optimal lot size of approximately 60' in width. This lot dimension is not an arbitrary number. It has been determined that in order to facilitate a home that has a forward orientation to the street, that allows sufficient off-street parking, and meets the minimum required yard dimensions under the zoning code, a 60' wide lot would be necessary to create homes that have a lasting value. Figure 5 shows the ideal future lot scenario in Old

Town. Approximately 40 existing homes currently meet the ideal lot size for the neighborhood.

There may be more private market interest in the home sites if additional land is added to some of the 30' wide lots in the neighborhood. For families and first-time homebuyers looking to start a family, additional land is a prerequisite for most real estate transactions.

Figure 5 - Example of a 60' wide lot with minimum yard requirements under current zoning regulations



If the neighborhood is to successfully market the neighborhood as a premier waterfront neighborhood, then having a decent lot size will help sell the neighborhood along with the other community assets it has to offer.

Overall, the number of rental units eliminated from the neighborhood over the course of several years would be about 50% or 90 rental units. The number of single-family lots would remain about the same at 177 units. The value of each of the single-family building lots is predicted to increase at least 20% after reaching the objectives outlined in this plan.

The number of multi-family units or attached condominium type units is expected to reach approximately 76-100. The ideal location for these units is within the neighborhood business areas along River Road and Vulcan Street above office or retail first floor units. There is an area along Tonawanda Street that will continue to promote rental apartments above existing business uses.

The average household size for the Old Town Neighborhood is expected to increase from 2.5 persons per unit to 2.9 persons per unit over the course of the neighborhood transition period (15-20 years). This prediction will be realized if trends continue into the near future. The total population of the neighborhood is expected to remain somewhat stable in numbers, but will transition from a mixed housing type community to a primarily owner-occupied housing community. Two keys in predicting neighborhood demand will continue to be performance of the local school district and the tax rate to pay for services.

Section 3.5 – The Town will ensure a safe and efficient transportation system for all types of transportation.

The traffic patterns around the ten blocks of Old Town are generally established in an efficient grid pattern with several opportunities for improving the connections to existing traffic systems adjacent to the neighborhood.

Many of the neighborhood concerns related to traffic flow and access have been related to on street parking headaches. The neighborhood redevelopment plan will address much of the issue through the doubling of the residential lot size. This will naturally allow for more off-street parking in the driveway or around the side and rear of the homes.

Several residents mentioned the awkward nature of some of the one-way traffic patterns that can be found on Grover Place, Edgar, and Irene Streets due to the proximity of the GM plant and the number of employees leaving the facility. The "do not enter" signs at the exit of the GM powertrain facility may be needed to continue to discourage traffic from entering the residential areas of Old Town, but some small improvements can be made on Irene and Grover to limit the one-way restriction to one block.

The Town is planning on full sidewalk replacements in conjunction with the Riverdale and Roswell reconstruction projects. There will also be enhanced pedestrian pathways along the Vulcan Street and River Road thoroughfares to allow safe pedestrian travel around the perimeter of the neighborhood. Edgar Avenue sidewalks were completed in the recent past. By providing the opportunity to travel safely along River Road, the residents can keep more physically active which in turn promotes a healthier living environment.

The Irene Street Extension Project will accomplish several objectives that residents expressed concerns about. The project will improve access to the neighborhood from Vulcan Street potentially eliminating the dead end at the south end of Irene Street as a source of criminal activity. The connection will also create a new pedestrian pathway option for residents along Irene to have a new route to services along Vulcan and Tonawanda Street. It also creates another path for healthy activities such as walking, running, and biking.

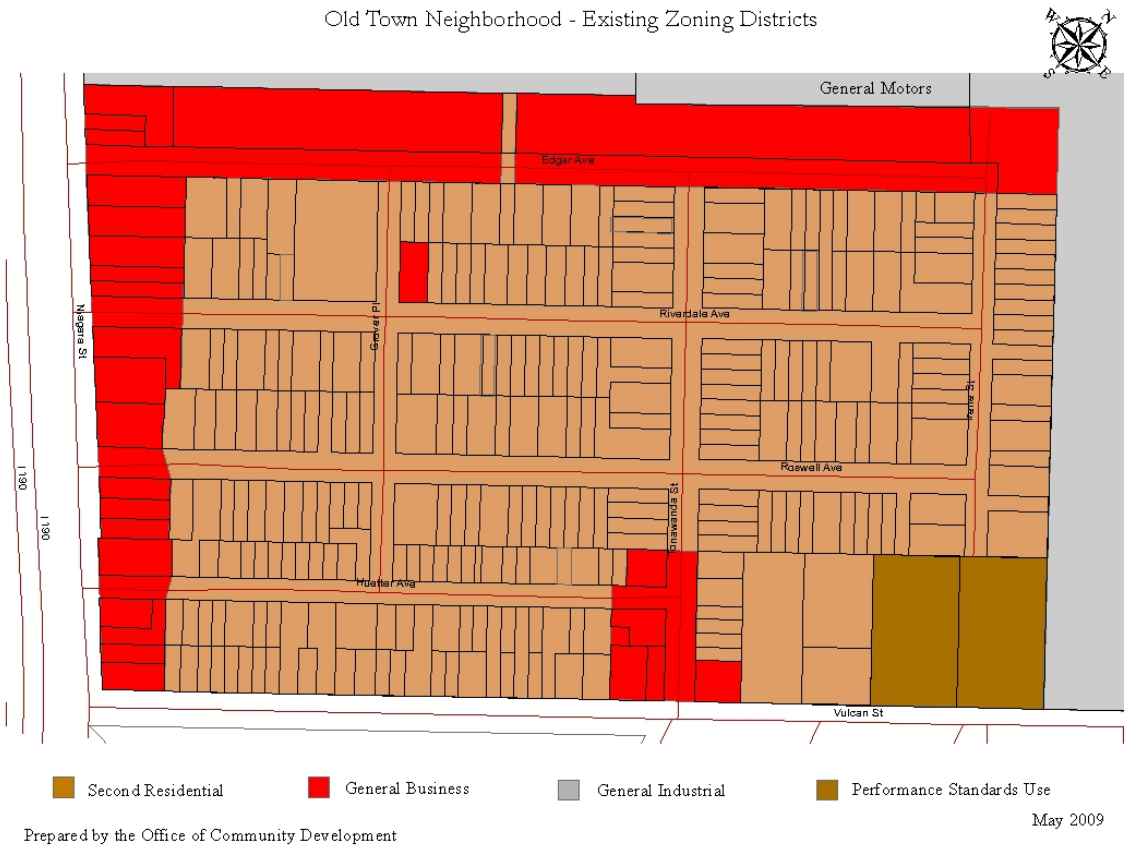
The bike path that extends north along Niagara Street in the City of Buffalo with a dedicated bike path, sidewalks, lighting, and benches can be continued up to Edgar Avenue with the lighting and landscaping improvements extending about 200' further north along River Road toward the GM powertrain entrance. This feature will hopefully provide southbound traffic on River Road with the feeling of entering a pleasant neighborhood area after the GM plant entrance.

Section 3.6 The Town will promote an attractive and well-maintained business environment for the neighborhood.

Old Town has had a history of varied commercial activity throughout the existing residential neighborhood. Prior to local zoning law enactment, many businesses operated alongside residential property. A majority of the area was zoned General Commercial despite the present day land use of primarily residential properties.

Recently, the Town Board enacted some zoning law amendments that will preserve the residential uses on the interior streets of Roswell, Riverdale, Huetter, Irene and Grover. There is General Commercial Zoning existing on River Road, Vulcan, and Tonawanda Streets. A small area of Vulcan Street is currently zoned Performance Use District. Many of the existing commercial establishments are taverns and restaurants that directly cater to the employees of the General Motors Powertrain Plant.

Figure 6 – Existing Zoning Districts



Many of the existing residents have expressed concern over the number of bars or taverns in the area and the after hours activity associated with those establishments. The future viability of the bars and taverns are linked to the operation of the GM plant. The number of full-time employees at the General Motors Powertrain Plant has declined over the last several years from approximately 4,000 in 1990 to approximately 1,000 in 2009. A

recent bankruptcy filing is underway for the company and many questions remain about the future of the facility. Its operation or non-operation is inextricably linked to the Old Town Neighborhood's business community.

If a number of business vacancies occur in the future due to a plant closure, then several reuse options remain for the neighborhood. The most favorable would be a residential conversion of the 2nd and 3rd floor of the buildings into higher rent apartments or condominiums. The new or renovated buildings could take advantage of the remarkable views of the Niagara River and Riverside Park.

Commercial uses would have to refocus on the existing residential service area of Old Town and the Riverside Community. Small retail operations and personal service shops that service the local area would be the natural retrofit for many of the restaurants and bars in the area that currently serve GM employees.

There are several economic incentive programs that could be employed to entice this transition and not allow vacancies to prevail. Some Economic Development programs for small neighborhood commercial currently do not exist in the area other than standard commercial bank lending through the Small Business Administration. Most of those loans are for bigger commercial operations or above $100,000. Many small neighborhood business uses are looking for less money in the form of grants ($5-$10K) that could mean the difference of opening up shop or remaining in business. The Town will work with existing agencies such as the Tonawanda Development Corporation to determine the feasibility of establishing some small economic development programs to help the neighborhood during any transition period.

Some examples of small economic development programs are as follows:

1. The Essential Services Grant Program- A marketing and small grant program (under $25,000) that lures in needed businesses or services to improve the quality of life for area residents. Examples are pharmacies, general stores, laundry, and bakeries.

2. The Commercial Rental Subsidy Program- A rent subsidy program that keeps commercial space occupied for a temporary time frame, normally 2 years. The sole purpose of the program is to prevent business vacancy in a specific neighborhood during a start up or transitional period in the business. Rental subsidies are provided to small businesses normally between $200-$300/ month that allows them to stay operational throughout a 2-year neighborhood transition period. If the business has not been able to make it after the temporary time period, they are terminated from the program.

3. Commercial Building Rehabilitation Loan/Grant Program- A program that targets the physical improvements to a business environment. Examples are façade/signage renovations, interior renovation, utility work, or window & roof replacement. Typical loan or grant amounts equal approximately $25,000 and may have a matching funds requirement from the business or property owner.

The Town will also pursue the streetscape projects in conjunction with the NYS Department of Transportation on River Road and the Erie County Highway Department for Vulcan Street. Streetscape projects, if designed properly can be an added incentive for existing business owners to stay in the area and also provide an incentive for luring new business investment.

As part of the streetscape projects new sidewalks, decorative lighting, pedestrian street furniture, and landscaping all play an important role in framing the commercial areas of the neighborhood. The Town will work with a professional landscape design firm in choosing the appropriate design elements in conjunction with the neighborhood business interests.

Figure 7- Niagara Street "Streetscape" in Buffalo

Figure 8 – Tonawanda and Vulcan Streets

The streetscape projects and the other street reconstruction projects are currently planned or will be inserted into the Town's Capital Improvement Program (CIP) as the plans are developed on an annual basis.

Section IV – Action Plan & Implementation Schedule

Neighborhood plans are great tools in preparing for the future, but all plans need implementation mechanisms and funding sources to be realistically achieved. This section is dedicated to outlining the responsible agencies and funding sources for the ideas generated in this document. Below is a chart that illustrates the action items and provides a timeline for implementation.

Description of Action	Responsible Agency	Amount	Source	Timeframe
Boys & Girls Club Renovations	Community Development	$500,000	Private & CDBG	Short Term 2009-2011
Maintenance of Grover Place Park	Youth, Parks, & Recreation	$15,000/year	General Fund	Ongoing 2010-
Marketing of Neighborhood	Old Town Residents	$5,000	CDBG	Mid Term 2013
Roswell & Riverdale Ave. Improvements	Highway, Water & Sewer, & Community Development	$3,900,000	CDBG	2013 – 2018
Irene Street Extension	Highway, Water Resources, Community Development	$350,000	CDBG	2018
River Road Streetscape Improvements	NYSDOT, Community Development	$950,000	NYS/CDBG	2012-2013
Vulcan Street Improvements	Erie County DPW, Community Development	$1,400,000	Erie County, GBNRTC, CD	2016-2017
Community Policing Program	Police Department, Community Development	$40,000/year	CDBG	Ongoing 2009-
Street Lighting Improvements	National Grid, Community Development	$300,000	CDBG	Short Term 2010-2012
Housing Quality GIS Database Development	Building Department, Community Development	$30,000	CDBG	Short Term 2010-2012
Acquisition/Demolition/New Construction Program	Community Development	$150,000/year	CDBG	Ongoing – Long Term 2009-
Economic Development Programs	Tonawanda Development Corporation/Community Dev	$250,000/year	CDBG	Mid Term 2012-2020

Section V – Environmental Review

As with most planning documents, the environmental review of policy is difficult to predict and assess. However, there are a generic set of assumptions that can be made regarding the adoption of the actions suggested in this neighborhood plan. In general, we can say that no significant adverse effects can be found regarding any action that may be taken as a result of this planning document. Infrastructure improvements suggested in the plan and any new construction projects will have to go through a subsequent environmental review process as required under SEQRA. The Town Board's discretionary action of adopting the principles outlined in this plan will most likely improve the environmental condition of the neighborhood over time. The goals of this neighborhood plan are an extension of the goals listed in the adopted comprehensive land use plan.

The most significant action regarding the neighborhood plan is the shift in policy regarding new construction of affordable housing in the residential sections of the neighborhood. Instead of infill construction being conducted on existing 30' lots, the Town's Office of Community Development will begin assembly of some of the smaller parcels into 45-60' residential lots for either new construction or creating somewhat larger private yards for residential use. The long-term environmental effects of this new policy will be reducing the overall impervious surface of buildings and paved areas of the residential neighborhood by approximately 50%.

The result of providing additional surface area for water to filter through the soil surface will reduce the burden on the existing stormwater drainage system and also lead to better subsurface water quality. The only new stormwater system improvement will be implemented when the Irene Street Extension Project is installed. Again, a subsequent environmental review will have to be employed when that project is ready to begin.

There will be no net increase in impacts on air quality as a result of this planning document. If anything, there may be a small decrease in population density over time that would lead to a subsequent decrease in vehicle emissions. The location of the NFTA bus loop at Vulcan Street provides a nice connection for the mass transit system in the County.

There is no significant adverse impact on any threatened or endangered plant or animal as a result of the actions suggested in this planning document.

There is no significant adverse impact on any agricultural land resource. All soils in the survey area are classified as urban.

Aesthetic resources should be improved over time as a result of implementing the actions outlined in this plan. If the GM facility ever becomes vacant, there is a plan for Edgar Street to shield the neighborhood from viewing a massive vacant industrial facility. The viewshed from the neighborhood to Canada and Riverside Park will be preserved and enhanced by providing additional viewing opportunities. Riverside Park itself is

preserved as a National Historic Landmark, and nothing in this plan compromises the parks history or significance to the neighborhood.

There will be no significant adverse impacts on open space and recreation as a result of the actions suggested in this plan. Many residences will see an increase in private recreation space as a result of an increase in lot size and additional pedestrian trails will increase the opportunities for local residents to enjoy the recreational benefits of the waterfront and River Road.

There will be no impact on any critical environmental areas as a result of this plan. The scope of the survey area only includes the residential and commercial portions of the 64-acre area between River Road and the GM facility (see figure 2/pg.2).

There would be no significant adverse impact that results from the suggested improvements to the transportation system. The small Irene Street Extension described in this plan will increase the opportunities for both vehicle and pedestrian traffic patterns around the East end of the neighborhood. The overall improvements to the pedestrian network will more than likely encourage more pedestrian traffic around the neighborhood. There are no additional residences being planned that would increase the output of vehicle trips for the existing system.

There would be no net significant adverse impact on the energy systems for the neighborhood. Over time, there may be a small decrease in the number of residential units in the neighborhood.

Increasing and improving pedestrian street elements throughout the neighborhood will help improve public health by providing additional areas for active and passive recreation. Additional street trees and street lighting will also improve public health and safety.

In summary, the actions suggested in this plan will not result in any significant adverse impacts on the environment. Over time, if all of the actions described in this plan are carried out, there may be small incremental improvements to the environmental health of the neighborhood. The aesthetic and pedestrian improvements suggested in the plan may benefit the residents of the neighborhood greatly.

Old Town Neighborhood Plan

Prepared by the Office of Community Development

May 2009