



# Restoring Our Waterfront

## Future Land Use Plan Update

TONAWANDA



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Clark Patterson Lee  
DESIGN PROFESSIONALS

The Cecil Group  
Planning and Design

FXM Associates  
Economic Planning & Research



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# Chapter 1

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## Introduction





## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Project Background

Located on the eastern shores of the Niagara River, the Town of Tonawanda's study area boasts a unique collection of assets and challenges.

The river, and the lands adjacent to it, have played a significant role in defining the town's land use and local economy throughout its history.

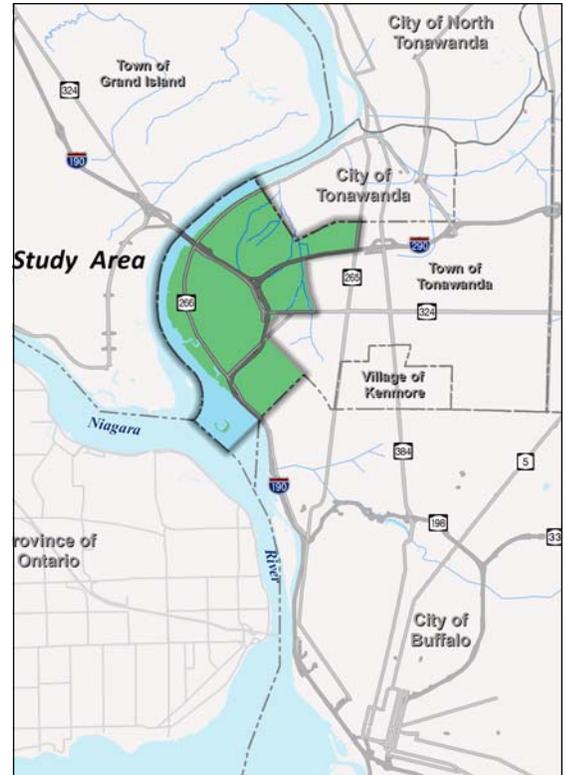
For Tonawanda, like many communities in the region, the river encouraged major industrial development and land uses along and near the river's edge. The waterfront contributed a significant portion of the Town's industrial heritage. Now the waterfront and its industrial heritage will play a significant role in defining the Town's ability to adapt to evolving economies and changing community development preferences.

Tonawanda's waterfront has long been a focus of community planning and debate. How can Tonawanda support existing, thriving industrial enterprises while at the same time encouraging sustainable, low-impact future development? That overarching question is the focus of the Waterfront Land Use Plan Update.

This update considers past planning efforts, examines existing conditions and explores ways to build on the strengths and opportunities the waterfront presents. The Waterfront Land Use Plan Update is one facet of the Town's overall efforts to:

- Promote sustainability
- Protect and enhance its natural and cultural resources
- Foster long-term economic viability
- Enhance community character and sense of place
- Improve multi-modal linkages
- Explore opportunities for regional collaboration

This plan is a continuation of regional stakeholders' collective efforts to enhance the Niagara River and surrounding communities. The 1994 Niagara River



Map depicting study area's location within the town and region. Note: All maps shown in this document are provided in full-page format in Appendix A.

## Waterfront Land Use Plan Town of Tonawanda

*“More and more people are seeing their waterfronts as the way to bring new life and energy to their community. They’re doing this by creating new economic activity, redeveloping historic and abandoned structures, improving waterfront recreation, and restoring and protecting natural resources. They have found the keys to make the most of their waterfront assets include a clear vision and plan, broad public involvement, creative partnerships, patience, persistence and a step-by-step strategy.”*

*~ NYS Division of Coastal Resources*

*Tonawanda has the largest single concentration of industry in the County outside of the City of Buffalo. That distinction has created immense opportunities as well as environmental challenges.*

*How this area is redeveloped over time will have a significant local and regional implications.*

Remedial Action Plan (RAP) prepared by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the NYS Dept. of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) established a framework to improve the River. Since that time, several significant milestones have been achieved to identify and remediate the health of the river and, in turn, revitalize the surrounding community.

Recently, there have been numerous initiatives in Tonawanda related to the implementation of the RAP and redeveloping the waterfront in a sustainable fashion. Through a partnership among Erie County, the Buffalo Niagara Riverkeeper and the Town, a strategic watershed management plan is being developed to focus on New York’s portion of the Niagara watershed. Tonawanda’s Waterfront Land Use Master Plan is a complementary component of the larger watershed management plan.

### **Scope of the Waterfront Land Use Master Plan**

Tonawanda’s Waterfront Land Use Plan encompasses over 4,200 acres of land bounded by the Niagara River and Interstates 190 and 290. The area consists of primarily industrial uses, but also includes large swaths of vacant land, some commercial areas, trails and recreational lands (Sheridan Park) and a small residential neighborhood. This planning effort builds upon the previous Waterfront Land Use Plan from 2002, reflecting physical changes and recent initiatives in the area. Specifically, there have been several waterfront-related planning and environmental projects as well as some redevelopment projects over the last decade.

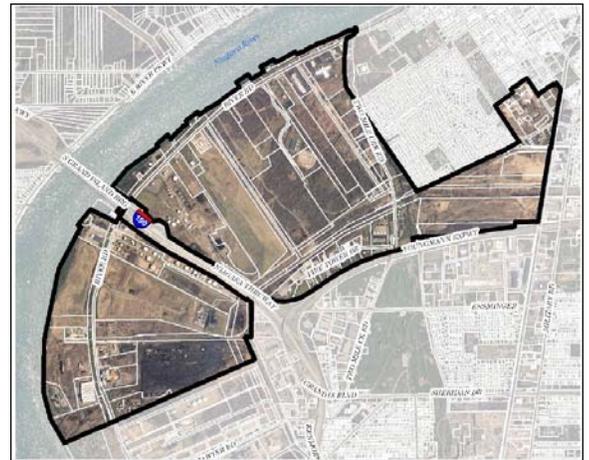
The scope of the plan is broad. It includes an overview of physical, natural and economic conditions of the study area as well as recommendations for sustainable development strategies. The plan outlines opportunities to effectively protect the river while enhancing the Town’s quality of life and long-term viability.

## Relationship to Other Plans

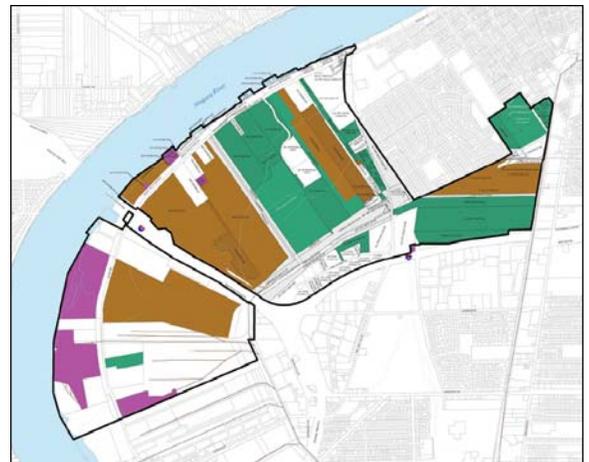
The Waterfront Land Use Plan outlines various policies and strategies to enhance, protect, and strengthen both the physical waterfront and the adjacent land in concert with Town's overall vision outlined in its 2005 Comprehensive Plan. The Town's proactive approach to planning for the future of the community is evident with the various plans and studies that have been undertaken in the past. Many of the policies, strategies, guidelines or recommendations in these documents have been incorporated into Town policies and review processes. With the development of this Waterfront Land Use Plan, a majority of those past planning initiatives still remain viable, while others will be replaced. The chart preceding this section highlights those plans and studies and their relationship to the adoption of this Plan.

### *Tonawanda Brownfield Opportunity Area – Pre-Nomination Study (November 2012)*

As the first of a three step process in developing a State-sponsored plan to revitalize brownfield sites, the pre-nomination study for Tonawanda identified the extents of the opportunity area and provided a preliminary description and analysis of the properties included. The analysis included a review of local demographics and their relation to the region as well as the physical features of the individual properties. Completed in 2012, the Brownfield Opportunity Area (BOA) encompasses over 1,700 acres of land and 202 individual parcels. Located in portions of the Town and City of North Tonawanda, the opportunity area straddles I-190 and generally stretches from the River to I-290. From these parcels, 8 were identified as potential brownfield sites through a review of environmental and permitting records, historical aerial imagery, interviews and site reconnaissance while 21 were classified as either underutilized/abandoned properties or undeveloped/vacant properties. While the number of sites is relatively small, the acreage they contribute to the total opportunity area is approximately 46 percent of the total land area. The final two stages in the BOA process go into more detailed analysis of and explore opportunities available on the brownfield sites



*The extent of the brownfield opportunity area (BOA) in Tonawanda. © LaBella, PC*



*The graphic above shows the extent of brownfields (brown), underutilized (purple) and vacant/undeveloped (green) properties within the BOA. © LaBella, PC*

## Waterfront Land Use Plan Town of Tonawanda



*The "Old Town" neighborhood in the southwest corner of the Town.*

(nomination stage) and develop strategies for remediation and redevelopment (implementation stage).

### *Old Town Neighborhood Plan (July 2010)*

"Old Town" Tonawanda is a small waterfront neighborhood that is located in the southwestern corner of the Town that is bounded by the City of Buffalo / Riverside Park, the Niagara River and the General Motors plant. Its location physically isolates it from the other residential areas of the Town, yet it is the only neighborhood in the Town that has views of the waterfront. Initially settled as an area for travelers seeking rest and services along the Erie Canal, the neighborhood grew out of the need to provide housing for the nearby manufacturing facilities in the 1950's. Eventually the canal was filled in (present-day I-190) and local industries reduced their local workforce.

The "Old Town" plan seeks to revitalize the area and capitalize on the numerous assets available. Recommendations include improvements to community aesthetics, infrastructure, safety and security, building rehabilitation, commercial development and redevelopment and connectivity (pedestrian / vehicular). Following the recommendations within the plan, the General Business District (C) along Edgar Avenue was rezoned to Second Residential (B) to reflect the desire to reduce unwanted commercial businesses and changes that have occurred over time.



*One of the NYS DEC air quality monitoring stations used at Beaver Island State Park as part of the community air quality study.*  
© NYS DEC

### *Tonawanda Community Air Quality Study (2007-2009)*

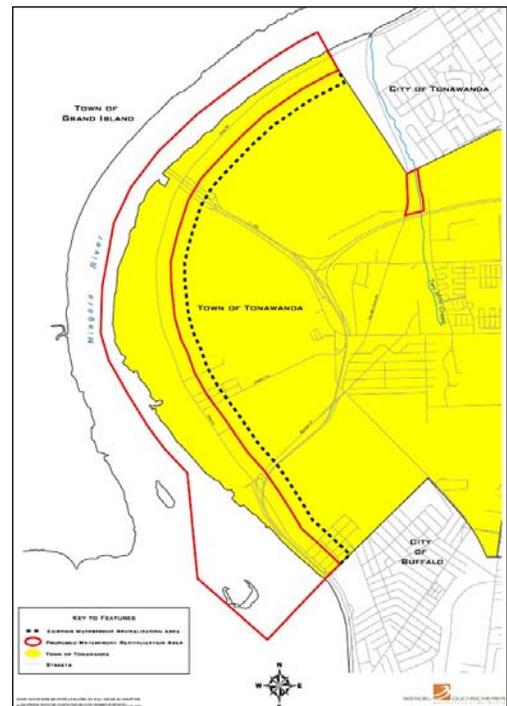
Between 2007 and 2009, the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (NYS DEC) conducted an air quality monitoring study in response to citizen concerns regarding potentially elevated emission levels. A number of sites are located along the Niagara River in the Town of Tonawanda, ranging from gasoline terminals to chemical manufacturers and refineries, making it one of the more heavily concentrated industrial areas in the region. Monitoring stations were set up in four strategic locations to measure pollution concentrations and evaluate potential public health risks. Six air toxics, including 1,3-butadiene; acetaldehyde; acrolein; benzene; carbon

tetrachloride and formaldehyde, were measured and found to exceed NYS DEC guidelines for annual average air concentration.

As a result of the study, emissions compliance monitoring and facility inspection has increased, which have already resulted in decreased emissions. In addition, the Town has entered into an EPA E3 Program (Economy, Energy, Environment) to develop a coordinated solution to revitalize local manufacturing businesses. The E3 Program brings together Federal and State agencies and the local community under a common agenda to collaborate on initiatives and efforts to strengthen small and medium manufacturers. Specifically, all of the partners involved in the program in Tonawanda are working towards positive air quality improvements as result. This partnership provides a wealth of resources to assist those involved develop sustainable practices, improve efficiency, reduce waste, and become more competitive in the global market.

*Town of Tonawanda Local Waterfront Revitalization Program (Amended April 2008)*

The Town of Tonawanda originally prepared and adopted a Local Waterfront Revitalization Program (LWRP) in 1996 encompassing all of the lands along the Niagara River waterfront inland to 1,000 feet east of River Road. The updated LWRP decreases the inland boundary to a distance to 500 feet east of River Road as the relocation of River Road, the impetus for the 1,000 foot distance, was not realized. The LWRP boundary was revised to help concentrate waterfront development protection policies and resources and provide greater flexibility for development outside of the boundary. In general, the LWRP seeks to balance the development potential in the area, including industrial and commercial, with recreational uses and public access opportunities in and along the waterfront. The plan addresses and highlights several areas of environmental concern, both past and present, and includes recommendations for their future remediation and / or reuse. A variety of policies and recommendations are contained in the LWRP addressing development / redevelopment, fish and wildlife protection, flooding and erosion control, public access,



*LWRP Waterfront Revitalization Area Boundary map with revised boundary shown in red.*

## Waterfront Land Use Plan Town of Tonawanda

historic and scenic resource protection and enhancement, energy and ice management, and water and air resource protection.

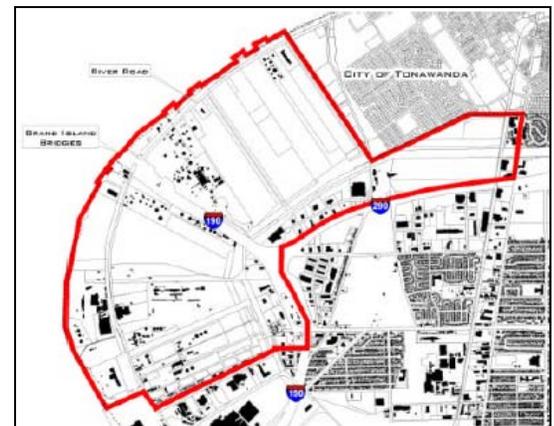
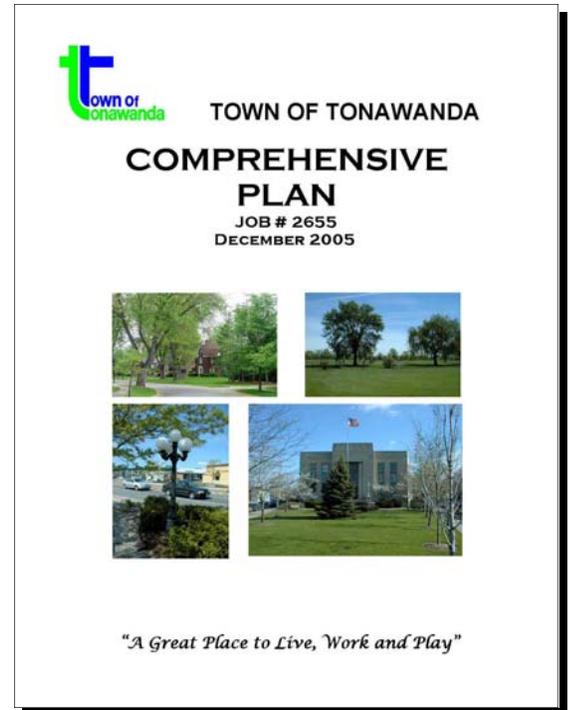
### *Tonawanda Comprehensive Plan (December 2005)*

The Town's last comprehensive plan was completed in 1955 and guided the community during a period of strong growth and development. In 2005, the community updated their plan to reflect the physical and demographic changes that have taken place and to consolidate the goals and recommendations from several studies into one cohesive document. In general, the updated plan focused on redevelopment opportunities in the east, as it is significantly built-out, and development for the western portion of the Town, which is primarily geared towards industrial and commercial uses. Specific recommendations for the waterfront include the encouragement of new industrial parks, redevelopment of vacant lands (especially the Town landfill and United Refining sites), improving recreational trail connectivity with other local and regional systems, continued implementation of the Local Waterfront Revitalization Program (LWRP) and continued cleanup of contaminated sites.

### *Tonawanda Waterfront Rezoning Study (April 2002)*

In 2002, a waterfront land use and rezoning plan was developed to examine the waterfront area north of Sawyer Road between the River and Interstate 190/290 and determine a new direction for redevelopment. As part of a typical land use plan, existing conditions were analyzed that included physical / natural features, socio-economics, and demographics. Noting the industrial background of the area and the associated environmental constraints, site contamination as well as physical constraints such as wetlands and floodplains, the plan provided goals and recommendations for the waterfront to transition the area from primarily industrial to a mix of uses. The plan also focused on a several key areas along the waterfront and provided general action items related to redevelopment.

A primary deliverable from the land use plan was the development of specific zoning language for new districts

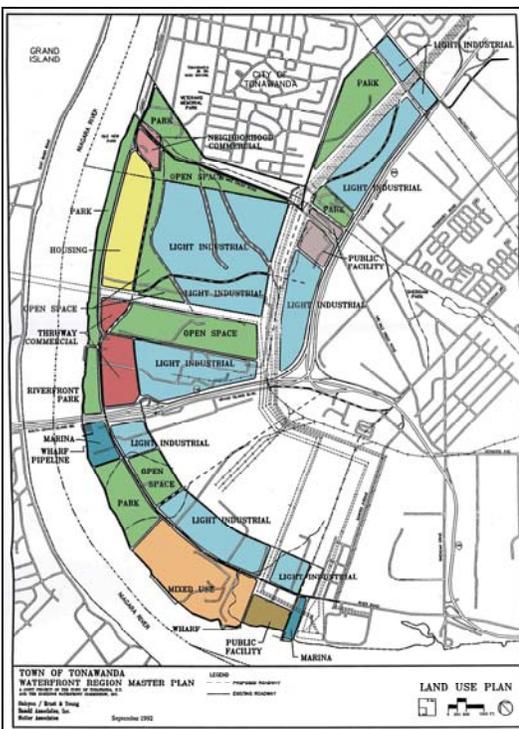


*Boundary of the 1992 Waterfront Rezoning Study - it is about half the area of the current waterfront land use update study area.*

within the study area that more closely aligned with the Town’s Local Waterfront Revitalization Program (LWRP) and established more conformance with waterfront-related uses. The new districts included Waterfront Mixed Use, Office/Research Development, Retail/Highway Commercial, and Waterfront Industrial. Generally, district regulations included specific design standards specific to each in addition to uses permitted and dimensional requirements. A River Road Overlay district was also developed which divided the River Road corridor into three distinctive character areas based on geographic location – Business Transitional, Thruway Impact, and Light Industrial Corridor – to provide further detailed standards for the waterfront. The overlay called for additional site design standards and requirements to ensure a higher quality final design of structures and property. Subsequently, the Town adopted some, but not all, of the new zoning districts proposed in the plan.

*Waterfront Master Plan (1992)*

The 1992 Waterfront Region Master Plan built upon earlier recommendations provided by the Horizons Commission for the waterfront (see Section IV, page 3-4 of the LWRP for additional background). Outlining a new vision for the Tonawanda waterfront, the plan included an assessment of conditions and created a land use plan for the region as a whole. Back in 1992, the area was also seen as being in a transitional state, with a move away from heavy industry towards a mix of uses that are centered on contributing to the vitality of the waterfront. In general, the plan called for rerouting River Road 1,000 feet inland north of Grand Island Boulevard to provide more waterfront land for development, primarily housing; designating the east side of the road for light industrial use (up to 4 million square feet) and commercial; and open space and recreation predominantly along the waterfront. Cherry Farm, River World and the extension of Isle View Park are all identified as significant contributors to the overall plan and provide a regional recreational draw. In addition to the general land use areas, six target projects were also identified including the River Road relocation, office and light industrial development sites (300 acres and Thruway Commerce Center), recreational sites (Cherry Farm and Riverfront Park), and riverfront housing (north of Grand Island Blvd, west of relocated River Road).



*This digitally enhanced copy of the land use plan from the 1992 Waterfront Land Use Plan shows recreation and open space interspersed throughout the region with strategic commercial and light industrial uses on the interior. Subsequent planning efforts have followed this same general pattern for redevelopment.*

**Waterfront Land Use Plan**  
**Town of Tonawanda**

Table 1-1: Existing Plan Relationship

<b>Existing Plans</b>	<b>Impact to Existing Plans</b>
Tonawanda Brownfield Opportunity Area - Pre-Nomination (2011)	<b>Supports/Supplements</b> - The pre-nomination plan establishes a baseline environmental conditions report on the northern part of the study area and provides additional detail beyond the scope of this plan. Various recommendations and findings in the plan have been incorporated or referenced with more emphasis on waterfront land use. No further action is required.
Old Town Neighborhood Plan (2010)	<b>Supports/Supplements</b> - Being the only residential neighborhood in the study area, this plan provides specific recommendations for the residents and businesses in the neighborhood. While reference has been made to the plan, it still is an important local planning resource. At this point, no further action is required. The Town may wish to revisit and update the plan in the near future as development changes in the waterfront.
Tonawanda Community Air Quality Study (2009)	<b>Supports/Supplements</b> - The community air quality study establishes a specific baseline for air quality impacts and improvements that help to drive future development and other performance-based criteria in the Town. This study provides valuable data and recommendations that pertain to areas outside of the Town of Tonawanda as well. No further action is required.
Local Waterfront Revitalization Plan (Adopted 1996, Amended 2008)	<b>Supports/Supplements</b> - The LWRP examines issues far beyond what the waterfront land use plan is intended to do, although there are various areas where the two intertwine. Recommendations in regards to land use have been referenced or incorporated into this plan where applicable. No further action is required. Where specific recommendations of this plan have been implemented, the Town should evaluate the LWRP and note “cross action” items that have been addressed.
Town Comprehensive Plan (2005)	<b>Limited Replacement</b> - The Town comprehensive plan looks at a number of issues throughout the Town, including the waterfront. Due to the age of the comprehensive plan and the changes that have occurred since that time, some of the recommendations of the waterfront land use plan supersede those within the comprehensive plan. When the current plan is updated, this plan should be reviewed and referenced or incorporated where necessary.
Waterfront Rezoning Study (2003)	<b>Replacement</b> - The previous rezoning study examined a similar area and provided limited recommendations to land use and zoning specifically. This updated plan expands upon the previous plan and includes more recent environmental actions and land use changes that have occurred since 2003. Pertinent recommendations are included.
Waterfront Master Plan (1992)	<b>Replacement</b> - This document, due to its age, has since been replaced by subsequent documents and development in the area. However, many of the general goals and land use patterns have been folded into other plans, including this update, although updated based on the most current physical and economic conditions.