



Re-engaging the Owasco River

Rivers built the industrial cities of New York State. They provided water, power and means of transportation for much of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Rivers were the economic engines. As time went on railroads and then highways provided easier transport, industries left for other parts of the nation, and cities turned their back on these waterways.

Today, many communities are rediscovering rivers as economic engines. However, instead of providing power for manufacturing, they drive tourism, recreation and improve quality of life. Rather than a dumping ground, they have proved to be major attractions and gathering places for community.

There are four main values that the Owasco River offers to the Auburn.

Economic Development Potential. The river has a chance to play a different, but still important role in the economic re-development of Auburn. First, it must be recognized that waterfront land is typically the most valuable land in a community. In this region's weak economy, this land along the Owasco River may be the most attractive to developers as the city hopes to bring additional residents to Auburn.

Recreation Potential. Another piece of the economic development is the use of the river by visitors or local residents as a place for boating, fishing, walking or biking. The river, in and of itself, will probably not attract many outside visitors, though a well-designed park system can be a regional draw. However, increased access and the opening of a greenway along the river can increase the appeal of living in Auburn as well as raise nearby property values.



Environmental Service. The Owasco River can and does play an important role in Auburn's natural environment. For people, the river provides a mechanism to catch and carry away stormwater. For flora and fauna, it potentially provides a wildlife corridor as well as becomes a source of food and water.

Green Community Value. A rehabilitated river with different kinds of development along it and that is very accessible to the public is a signal of the strong sustainable values held by the community.

Existing Conditions

An examination of the river reveals a variety of conditions, opportunities and challenges. Since few residents express much knowledge about the river, the following is a short visual review of the river. This is far from exhaustive, but proved helpful during public meetings to spark discussion and stimulate ideas.

Osborne Street and Pulisifer Drive



As the water flows out of Owasco Lake, the first dam it hits in the city is in this area. A large parcel of city owned land contains piles of debris and seems a staging area for some municipal operations.

Lake Avenue Bridge



Looking north from the Lake Avenue Bridge in the fall, it is easy to see where the city has constructed access ways for maintenance along the water. This is also an important road connecting the Osborne and Owasco neighborhoods for cars and pedestrians.

Canal Street



Another dam can be found on the river. This one has a pedestrian bridge, the west end of which leads Canal Street. Maps show Canal Street as two dead end streets, but in reality, a packed dirt road connects both parts, as shown in the right picture. Most of the land is city-owned.

Downtown



Downtown finds the river culverted and, therefore, set apart from pedestrian traffic especially in the park. As of this plan's writing, the Auburn City Council had approved plans and funding for the park's redevelopment, which is underway.

McMaster Street Area



This old factory site sits across the river from the prison. It is a flat site, close to downtown. An old factory building and some more recent out buildings exist, but seem sparsely occupied. It appears to be a general dumping ground.



Clark Street



The banks of the river are high and flat. The area is lightly developed with commercial/industrial space (left) and rundown residential (right). Clark Street ends, short of the river, at a power substation (right).

North Division Street



The dam and powerhouse at North Division Street offer dramatic views and an excellent recreational opportunity. Unfortunately, the "scenic outlook and picnic area" marked by the green sign have fallen into major disrepair.



Goal 1. Reconnect people to the river

Strategy R1 – Create a greenway along the Owasco River

The Owasco River was once heavily used for industry and power production. Over the years, much of the riverfront has been neglected and forgotten to the point that it is overgrown and underutilized. This prized riverfront can be reopened in key locations, initiating the development of the Owasco Riverfront Greenway (the Greenway), which will improve property values and quality of life in Auburn. Ideas for a greenway are not new. Recommendations for some additional public access to the river have been made in previous planning efforts, such as the Owasco-Osborne Neighborhood Plan.

Vision for the Waterfront

In re-engaging the Owasco River,
the Greenway and the nodes along it should...

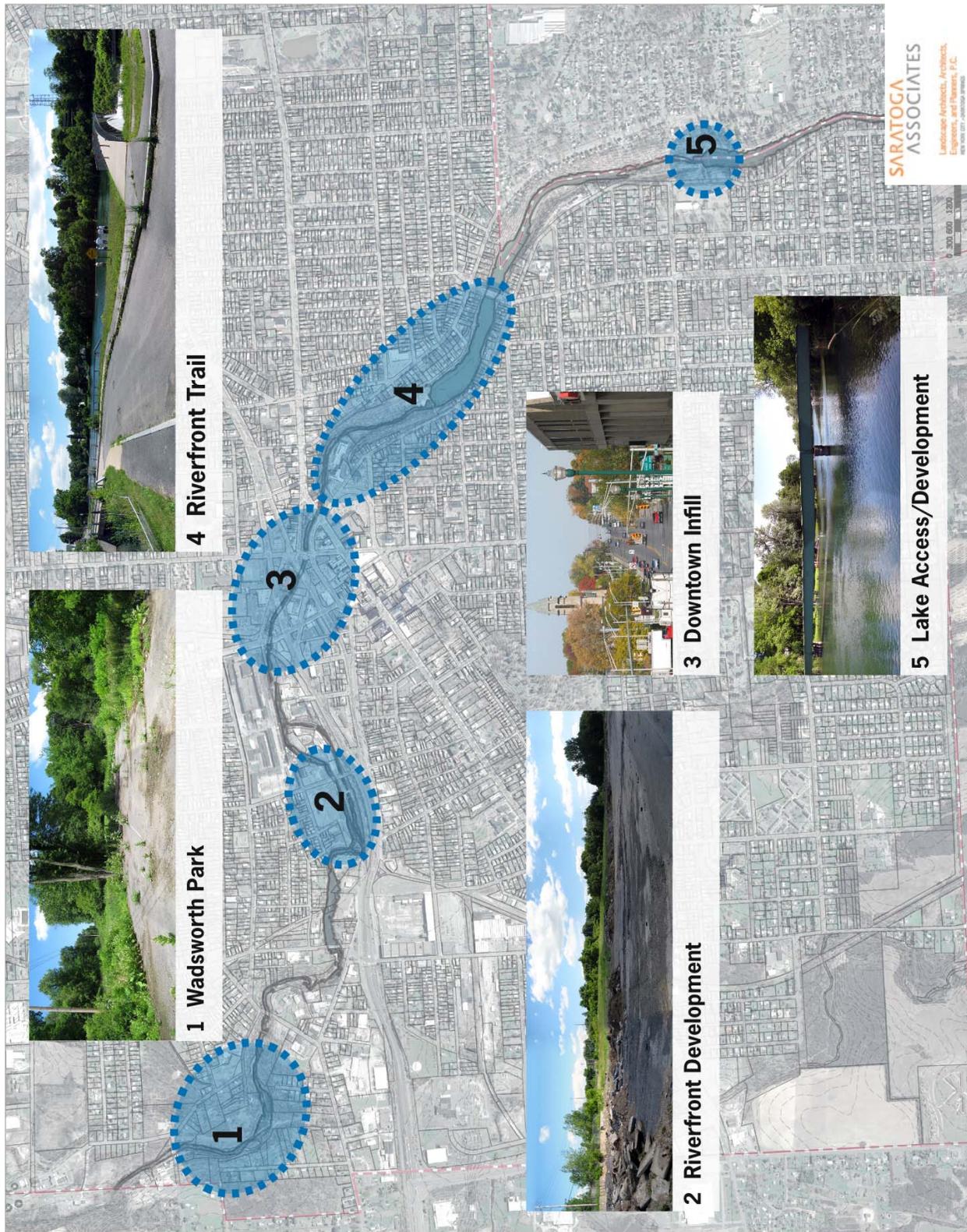
- ...open the water to the residents and visitors.
- ...highlight the community's traditional connection to the river.
- ...embrace the city's vision of long-term sustainability.
- ...enhance Auburn's new brand as "History's Hometown."
- ...create unique development opportunities for development projects in keeping with Auburn's vision and goals.
- ...protect the river's health and natural beauty.

The key locations (nodes) along the Greenway are determined through composite considerations in regards to existing conditions and context along the riverfront. Property ownership, vehicular access, pedestrian access, water access, lake access, topography, adjacent land use, and river flow conditions are used to locate the nodes.

These nodes are the first step in the development of the Greenway. Once created, further development will radiate outward, connecting the nodes and improving land values and quality of life in Auburn. Additionally, future private and public developments along the Riverfront should allow for the extension of the Greenway between the nodes. The Greenway will eventually connect both banks of the riverfront from the Owasco River to Wadsworth Park with revitalized development and pedestrian access.

The map on the following page and the descriptions that follow illustrate the various river front opportunities available along the Owasco River. The rest of this strategy deals with the entire river.

Before construction can begin, detailed plans will need to be developed. Throughout the process, it is important that residents along the river and from across the city have the opportunity to participate. However, these pages set out the overall vision and offer some specific guidance so that the riverfront land develops in a manner consistent with Auburn's urban character and sustainable vision of its future.





1. Wadsworth Park Node

Wadsworth Park will be the first constructed node, and is also the northern terminus of the Greenway. As such it will work to connect the Northwestern end of Auburn with downtown along the riverfront. This node will be designed as a rural park with a play area, picnic tables, parking, pedestrian riverfront access, and connections to historic river uses. (See Strategy R2 for more details.)

2. Riverfront Development Node

The Riverfront Development Node is designed to initiate mixed-use development near downtown – adding to existing revitalization efforts through the city's core. (See Strategy R4 for more details on the zoning that might occur in this area.) The Riverfront Development Node will provide a connection for the Owasco River Greenway midway between downtown and Wadsworth Park, provide mixed-use and pedestrian access to the riverfront, radiate improved property values, and revitalize the Wall Street neighborhood.

The site itself is a large riverfront parcel with excellent street front access on two sides. One side is adjacent to private homes, and the other to commercially zoned lots. The riverfront itself is accessible along the entire lot and, potentially, across the river as well.

A major aspect of the lot's context is the correction facility. Related complications will require study, though it is likely that development in this plot can work with all aspects of the neighborhood to improve property values and quality of life issues.

It is crucial that whatever private sector development be allowed in this (or any) place along the river that the access to and along the waterfront be maintained. The eventual vision of a greenway along the entire stretch of the river should not be compromised for any reason. (See Strategy R3.)

3. Downtown Infill Node

There are numerous points along the river in downtown that would make sense for new development. These vacant areas often once housed structures and replacing those buildings would help reweave the urban fabric destroyed by the construction of the arterial. It is important that the mass and siting of these infill buildings match the traditional historic and pedestrian-friendly character of downtown and described in the Boosting Downtown chapter. As described above, it is important that public access be guaranteed along the river.

4. Riverfront Trail Node

The Riverfront Trail Node is an area with the potential for an extensive greenway connection from downtown past the Lake Avenue Bridge. It is here that the trails can get started and demonstrate to others the potential importance of redeveloping much of the riverfront in this manner.



A large hydroelectric dam that spans the river at its widest point largely defines this part of riverfront. The pedestrian bridge over the dam is the major hinge point at which the parcels change from mixed use zoning to industrial zoning.

On the water, above the dam the river is held back into a small waterbody, while below the dam the river narrows and flows quickly through a narrow flood plain that continues until the river is channelized as it runs through downtown. Both cases provide for different design opportunities.

Above the dam, the pedestrian bridge and lake-like waterfront provide for easy water access for fishing, small watercraft, and mixed-use development. Below the dam is ideal location for a series of naturalistic riverfront trails connecting downtown to the lake-like waterfront.

There are some city-created riverside maintenance trails in this area. The investment already made in these trails brings public river access closer to reality and maximizes the money that the city must already put into these lanes.

5. Lake Access / Development Node

The Lake Access / Development Node is the southernmost area along the Greenway. It will continue the Greenway from the Riverfront Node and Downtown and help extend the greenway through to high school and eventually to Owasco Lake.

This is a large plot of largely city owned land. The waterfront access is above the dam, which will allow for a public boat launch for small and medium sized craft with access to Owasco Lake. Below the dam, the land might be suitable for private redevelopment, though, as noted earlier, all development must include access to and along the riverfront for the public.

The lot itself has an asphalt-paved driveway and is located just above a dam. From this point up the river, all of the single-family homes have small docks for watercraft access. Just south of the node is the high school, which already has a path to the Lake.

Strategy R2 – Create Wadsworth Park on the river

This is one of the major recommendations for the near future in terms of reconnecting the Auburn community to the Owasco River. It is an effort that has been under consideration in the city. This strategy takes thinking about the park a little further with broad design outlines and the development of some crucial decisions that must be made.

As the first node in the Auburn Riverfront Greenway (the Greenway) to be developed, Wadsworth Park is an important part of the Auburn Comprehensive



Plan. When completed, the park will be the Northern terminus of the Greenway. The site slopes down slightly toward the riverfront, and will not require very much grading. Yet it is overgrown with mostly invasive species that have been growing for years unchecked. The riverfront is mostly inaccessible due to the weedy overgrowth, but clearing the unwanted growth will expose an excellent riverbank.

The ruins of a historic hydro facility are located on the site. A stone building wall and its foundation could be used for historic interpretation. Also a concrete spillway that extends across the river could provide a striking view and a potential water access point. When the overgrowth is removed, the spillway structure will be a striking visual reminder of a past use and an impressive water feature. On both banks of the river there are riverfront paths and the chance to extend the paths to connect both sides of the river between bridges to the north and south.

At this point of the Owasco River, the river runs relatively narrow and flows quickly, with the exception of where it flows over the spillway. Just above the spillway the water smooths and calms, yet below the spillway there are some small rapids that are visually striking, but will prevent safe water access.

In the immediate neighborhood of the park, there are a number of parcels that are vacant; some owned by the city and others in private hands. The map that follows shows these parcels. Immediately one could imagine how this park could quickly become the first link in the greenway trail. From the park, a trail could strike out along the steep southern side of Wadsworth Street and make a connection to Aurelius Avenue and the city land beyond.

One of the biggest challenges is access to the park. As presently configured, Wadsworth Street is the only route in. Beyond Canoga Street, this narrow road becomes one way. A piece of a parcel at the northern end of the proposed park along Canoga Street could alleviate this problem. The land is part of a larger parcel with the house on the eastern half of the plot. If it could be acquired, it would facilitate access and take the burden off of Canoga Street residents.

Additionally this acquisition would open the park up to other city owned and vacant parcels to the North of Wadsworth Park that would connect the park to woodland trails, northern riverfront access, parking areas, and an extended pedestrian loop.

If not, traffic patterns could also be reworked along Wadsworth and Canoga Streets to allow vehicular access to the park. Another alternative is to use some of the ample public land around the park for parking – and make Wadsworth Park accessible only by non-vehicular transportation.



During the preparation of the comprehensive plan, potential designs were drafted for Wadsworth Park within its present boundaries. The park is accessed through a parking loop from Wadsworth Street. Pedestrian pathways dotted with protected picnic areas extend throughout the park. The overgrowth is cut down and the riverbank is open to provide visual access to the entire riverfront. A mix of open grassed areas and tree-lined paths fill the main park area. Historic structures are spotlighted in the design, and the spillway is fully visible to give a sense of the past use of site and river.

A rough cost estimate for this concept of Wadsworth Park is roughly \$1.1 million for full construction. However, further surveying, geotechnical study, and other analysis will be necessary to give a more exact cost for the park construction. In addition, these further physical studies, as well as input from citizens around the city, will help refine both the design and the cost.



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Wadsworth Park Conceptual Design



R3 – Ensure that public access along the river is protected over time.

The river is a community asset, but today, citizens can only visit it at certain points. Strategy R1 (above) describes a way to, over time, build paths and trails along the waterfront in order to make it steady connection through the city.

This strategy (R3) supports that notion by specifically calling for the protecting of public access that now exists on public land and that may become open on private land. It is crucial that the greenway starts – and demonstrates its success to the community – on existing public rights of way. As public or private development/re-development occurs along the river, public access along the river must be a condition before any project commences. Not only must rights of way be granted, but also the land must be improved into a trail or pathway that allows safe public travel (by foot or bike) along the water. The vision of a greenway along the river will fail if every link is not completely protected.



Paths along rivers have proved to be boons to communities, residents and businesses. Paths can range from packed dirt in Cambridge, Massachusetts along the Charles River (left), to cobblestones in Providence, Rhode Island (center) and to separated uses for walkers and bikers as in Tonawanda, New York (right). In Tonawanda the yards of homes back right up to the well-used path. Residents sit in their backyards and watch the world go by on land and water.

Goal 2. Leverage the Owasco River as an economic asset for the community.

Strategy R4 – Rezone certain areas along the river to allow private residential or mixed-use development, while protecting public access to and along the river.

As described in Strategy R1, certain parts of the river, particularly those close to downtown, should be designated for private development. These projects should be dense residential or multi-use. The zoning should be changed to encourage these projects. The zoning should make sure to shape the develops with at least the following points in mind...

- > Protect public access to and along the river
- > Waterfront developments, particularly near downtown, should be fairly dense.
- > Walkability is crucial, although cars will have to be accommodated.
- > Connect projects to surrounding neighborhoods, particularly downtown



- > Residential is a high priority to bring people within walking distance (perhaps via paths along the river's edge) to downtown. However, office and retail should also be allowed.
- > Building styles should reflect and enhance Auburn's urban and historic character

Strategy R5 – Develop and promote options for enlarging the Market Street Park along Loop Road.

The downtown park is high above the culverted river as the waterway cuts through downtown. The separation from the river is necessary as long as the Loop Road in this area continues to serve a useful function. It is likely that, in the near future, the community will find the road's transportation function less important and take that as an opportunity to narrow it and put the land to better use. On one side, the extra land might be used to create a sloped portion of the park to get people closer to the river. On the other side, underused parking lots could be targeted by entrepreneurial landowners for infill development creating dense, walkable commercial strip – enlarging downtown and activating this road along the river for pedestrians. The Comprehensive Plan Advisory Committee recognizes that this is a long-term vision.



Various strategies have been used to open waterways in many cities to the public. Some of these ideas might be starting points as the Auburn community thinks about reconnecting people to the river in downtown.

Strategy R6 – Find ways to open the river to more boat navigation

The dams along the Owasco River offer an opportunity for increasing hydroelectric power production. Unfortunately, they also block the ability of boats to travel from Owasco Lake up the river to downtown and beyond. Remedying this situation may be complicated, especially as the community also seeks to reactivate dams for hydropower. Still, it may be worth investigating ways through or around the dams so that boats can navigate as far as downtown.

Given likely water levels, there is no expectation that large power boats would be able to make that far. It is more likely personal watercraft would benefit the most. Therefore, the cost/benefit of this strategy will have to be carefully weighed. It is hoped that such a move would boost downtown business and increase the drive for opening access to the river downtown. However, it may not be fiscally feasible given the usually low water levels.



Goal 3. Improve and maintain the integrity of the Owasco River as an environmental resource

Strategy R7 – Review and improve city ordinances with regards to stormwater runoff.

Stormwater runoff carries more than water. As rainwater washes down streets and sidewalks it picks up contamination and nutrients that pollute waterways. Federal rules seek to control this 'non-point' pollution by requiring certain-sized new development projects to provide a level of protection against stormwater runoff.

The federal rules offer a good starting point, but the city should research and implement regulations that control runoff from all projects. In addition to tightening standards for new projects, the city should create and fund a program to reduce the runoff from existing developments. Also, it is crucial that the city leads by example and do everything possible to reduce non-point source pollution from its own land.

Strategy R8 – Undertake a public education campaign to keep the water in the Owasco River clean.

A sustained campaign to keep the Owasco River clean will require extensive public information and involvement. The city should continue to fund the watershed inspector position and consider funding a watershed or riparian program to keep the river's importance before the general public as well as various public officials. Such a program could also be done by or in conjunction with a private non-profit organization collaborating with the city. Such a "Know Your River" campaign also builds and maintains support for other objectives described in this chapter.

Strategy R9 – Reactivate the river's hydropower capacity.

In 2004, the citizens of Auburn approved a referendum that created the Auburn Public Power Agency. This allows the city to buy and sell as well as develop its own alternative energy systems. One aspect of this power agency could be the revitalization of hydropower at dams deemed appropriate.

The city is already working with the New York Power Authority to evaluate the potential of several hydroelectric sites along the Owasco River, especially in terms of low flow hydrogeneration. Any moves in this arena will also need review by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

The city has also received grant money from the state Department of Environmental Conservation for dam stabilization at the State Dam near the city's water filtration plant and lower pumping station. The city is already contemplating the installation of low-flow/low-head hydropower at this site.

All of these efforts as well as similar ones should be encouraged, supported and expanded.