



## Executive Summary



Welcome to the City of Auburn Comprehensive Plan.

This comprehensive plan, created with the extensive involvement of citizens, business leaders, elected officials and city staff, describes a vision for Auburn's vibrant and revitalized future – a bustling community that is both environmentally and economically sustainable over the long-term.

The **Vision for a Sustainable Auburn** is the starting point for planning the city's future. This short statement, crafted by the comprehensive plan advisory committee and based upon extensive input received at numerous public meetings, pulls together the major components of a thriving Auburn in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – a city that is attractive to residents, workers and visitors. It is highlighted on the next page.

The philosophy of long-term economic and environmental sustainability underpins this document. It is a plan for Auburn's revitalized future as a thriving urban center – a vibrant core for surrounding towns and the greater region.

This plan is not the end product of a project, but the next step in the city's ongoing revitalization efforts. The work presented here is only as good as the effort to implement it. The last chapter describes important implementation steps that involve elected officials, city staff and agencies around the city. Only working together can the goals of this document be achieved and its vision be realized.



At the same time, the vision and goals described in these pages must guide all city actions. The comprehensive plan should be consulted regularly by the city council, planning board, zoning board, city staff, private developers, agency heads and the general public. The plan may not hold the answer to a specific problem facing the city, but its direction – its vision and goals – can be used as measuring sticks against which options can be evaluated. Ultimately, every decision needs to push the city towards its long-term economic and environmental sustainability.

### **Vision for a Sustainable Auburn**

From mills to movies, Auburn has traditionally been a hub of innovation and economic progress. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century our city is ripe with potential, which we will maximize by creating a thoroughly sustainable community – from a bustling downtown to diverse neighborhoods. Auburn will become the regional destination for people seeking a culturally rich, economically successful and environmentally friendly place to live, visit, or conduct business. Sustainable Auburn will be a...

...Dynamic place with a thriving, mixed-use downtown as well as healthy, safe, and cohesive neighborhoods.

...Diverse community that embraces different cultures, offers opportunity to all age groups, and supports those in need.

...Heart of regional creativity by supporting and attracting cultural venues, artisans and talent.

...Vibrant tourism destination that builds upon and protects the city's cultural, historic and natural assets.

...Green city that practices sustainable development in all public and private endeavors as well as opens itself up to natural amenities such as the Owasco River.

...Center of innovation that builds an entrepreneurial culture attracted to and fostered by our environmental ethic.

...Great place because its people come together to guide the city's future.

The business climate of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will require the city be prepared to house a variety of enterprises. Traditional heavy industries, though on the decline in the northeastern United States, still have a foothold in Auburn. At the same time, many new businesses will be knowledge-based or creative enterprises. These lighter operations would fit easily into mixed-use centers. In fact, much of the creative class would want to be in a place where they can blend the personal and professional hours of the day – work, grab coffee with friends and then finish up a project. Entrepreneurs, no matter their field, need to have a business and people climate that suits their lifestyle.



The population of Auburn, as with other cities in upstate New York, continues to decline. This decline and economic dislocation have many causes – and the trend is not likely to reverse soon. However, this situation provides an opportunity for communities to rethink their goals for the future. The city does not need the “grow at any cost” mentality that afflicts and impacts many communities.

The city needs to think about making itself an *urban* success. Vibrant neighborhoods, an active and thriving downtown, a strong arts and culture scene, tight community and an ethic of long-term environmental and economic sustainability. It is this high quality of life that will attract people to Auburn to start and work in the small businesses that generate the most jobs in this country.

Auburn has started to transition from a manufacturing focus to a more diversified economy that includes the knowledge and creative sectors. To do this, the city must attract the entrepreneurs and skilled workers that will create and support the 21<sup>st</sup> century companies that will drive the city to success – and accommodate the preferences and lifestyle needs of these residents.

University of Toronto professor Richard Florida’s widely cited work, “Competing in the Age of Talent: Environment, Amenities, and the New Economy” identified the preferences of knowledge workers.

- > Large numbers of active young people
- > Wide range of outdoor activities and recreation
- > Vibrant music and performance scene
- > Nightlife diversity, including many options without alcohol
- > A healthy environment and a dedication to sustainability
- > A lifestyle which is youth-friendly and supportive of diversity

Finally, Auburn should make it easy for the private sector to give the community what it wants. From a land use perspective, the city should set high *and* achievable standards for new development. Once enacted, standards should not be compromised as they weaken the community’s long-term vision. However, the city must make it quick and easy for the private sector to meet those standards.

### **Building a Sustainable Future: The Auburn Comprehensive Plan**

These complementary notions of economic and environmental sustainability weave their way through all chapters of this comprehensive plan. Communities are complex entities. The interwoven relationships between people and business as well as the land upon which they move make comprehensive planning an intricate, but vital, process. Even the casual reader of this document will find that many of the goals and strategies expressed in one chapter relate to, impact or could even be found in another chapter.



Green comes in many flavors in Auburn. The city’s vision as a sustainable city includes becoming a “regional destination for people seeking a culturally rich, economically successful and environmentally friendly place to live, visit, or conduct business.”



The chapters, or topics, dealt with in this plan are:

- > Boosting Downtown
- > Revitalizing Neighborhoods
- > Shaping Business Growth Across Auburn
- > Creating a Welcoming Community
- > Re-Engaging the Owasco River
- > Simplifying & Improving Development
- > Realizing the Vision – Plan Implementation

This final chapter, Realizing the Vision, contains the implementation component – the who, when, and approximate resource requirements of getting each strategy completed.

### **Boosting Downtown**



People like to window shop – walking from store to store – as long as the experience is interesting and safe. A fun and engaging place gets people out of cars and venturing by foot into stores, restaurants and other establishments. It is the premise upon which traditional downtowns have been built.

Realizing this, many private developers now build “town center” developments to attract shoppers – trying to recreate what Auburn has already on Genesee Street. The statistics show that such a strategy bears economic fruit. In 2005 an International Council of Shopping Centers survey found that customers spent an average of \$57.50 an hour in enclosed shopping malls versus an average of \$84.00 an hour in town center developments.

Unfortunately, the broader downtown in Auburn, the area enclosed by the Business Improvement District boundaries, was hit hard by economic decline, suburban competition and misguided urban renewal. As with many cities, officials thought that downtowns could compete with suburban malls by becoming more like those suburban malls and catering to the automobile. While concessions have to be made to cars, the wholesale gutting of commercial areas proved a poor strategy.

Long-term economic and environmental sustainability depend upon preserving and reinforcing the existing downtown historic character along Genesee Street and ensuring that new development within the BID boundaries reinforces the walkable, urban nature of a successful downtown.

The goals and strategies described in the Boosting Downtown chapter of this comprehensive plan tailor for Auburn some of the best revitalization strategies from across the United States. These strategies, along with some of those in other sections, seek to continue revitalization efforts.



The following goals for downtown Auburn will move the community towards realizing its vision.

Goal 1. Enhance downtown as a walkable, vibrant urban place

Goal 2. Encourage more people to live and work downtown

Goal 3. Improve the marketing of downtown

Goal 4. Develop downtown Auburn as a center for arts and entertainment.

### **Revitalizing Neighborhoods**



The vision for a sustainable Auburn focuses on “healthy, safe, and cohesive neighborhoods” that are physically and demographically diverse. Even in residential areas, it is the urban fabric that will competitively differentiate Auburn living from suburban areas.

Cities with vibrant, desirable neighborhoods attract people who will live, work, shop and recreate in the community. High quality, safe, attractive and affordable residential areas are the foundation for social vitality and economic success. There must be enough desirable homes for workers and entrepreneurs – the people who will drive the city’s ongoing revitalization.

Housing and neighborhoods in Auburn run the gamut from safe and desirable to very distressed. Since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the city has lost almost a quarter of its population – resulting in pockets of disinvestment and, consequently, a lack of neighborhood and city cohesiveness in some places.

As in most urban areas in the region, Auburn’s residential buildings tend to be older, with over half built before 1910. If properly maintained, older housing stock can be an asset to a community by preserving historic character. However, without regular upkeep, older homes can be a burden, as in some areas of Auburn. Also Auburn’s housing values are fairly low, with very few homes worth more than \$200,000. The majority of both one- and two-family homes are worth less than \$100,000.

Some important challenges identified by residents during the public meetings include increasing walkability, raising owner-occupancy rates, reversing the conversion of single family homes to multiple units and the production of higher-end housing units near downtown. To tackle these challenges, this comprehensive



plan outlines the following goals and strategies, which are described in the chapter Revitalizing Neighborhoods.

Goal 1. Encourage the location and form of new development to emphasize pedestrians and protect neighborhood character.

Goal 2. Encourage environmentally friendly homes and neighborhoods

Goal 3. Improve the quality of life of existing neighborhoods

### **Shaping Business Growth Across Auburn**



In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, small companies will drive local and regional economic growth. While large businesses often draw headlines and garner strong political support, small businesses have a bigger impact on the economy. In New York State, the 1.9 million small businesses represent 99.1 percent of the state's employers and 51.7 percent of its private sector employment.

Small business development is more cost effective for regional and local efforts. For example, if the expected 5,500 jobs materialize in the wake of a new chip fabrication facility in Malta, New York, the state will have spent about \$117,000 per job in tax incentives. By contrast, the U.S. Small Business Administration says that job creation in small businesses costs as low as \$10,000 per job.

The odds are also better. The International Economic Development Council reports only about 300 companies consider relocating in a given year, while 300,000 economic development organizations and communities around the country vie for this small number of prospects. The Malta, New York chip fabrication plant recruitment effort, which finally broke ground in 2009, began in the 1980s.

Attracting small businesses, especially in the knowledge and creative sectors, requires communities no longer focus solely on creating a friendly business climate. University of Toronto professor, Richard Florida wrote recently that creative cities are not thriving due to traditional economic reasons such as access to transportation, tax breaks or fiscal incentives. "They are succeeding largely because people want to live there. The companies follow the people – or, in many cases, are started by them."<sup>1</sup> These people, who will start and staff Auburn's 21<sup>st</sup> century economy, must have places where they want to work. Many people today mix their home and work lives – creativity has become a 24 hour a day / seven day a week endeavor. The founders of tomorrow's successes may not want to commute far from home. And

<sup>1</sup> Florida, Richard, "Cities and the Creative Class", *City and Community*, March 2003, p. 9.



they may want to take a break midday or in the evening to attend a ball game or play, catch a show or meet friends in a coffee shop before heading back to work.

This is the reality facing Auburn today. Many parts of the community contribute to commerce. In addition to downtown, there are small neighborhood retail areas and large suburban style strip malls. The city's Technology Park hosts various industries, which, by design, tend to have a green focus. Together, these must work to reinforce Auburn's historic character, urban fabric and sustainable values. Coordinating and shaping the growth of these areas is important to maintaining them over time. All members of the community, including businesses, will benefit from a growth plan with a consistent vision that protects the investment of property owners by ensuring all adhere to the same standards.

To realize the vision of Auburn as an "economically successful... center of innovation" that "builds an entrepreneurial culture" in line with the city's environmental ethic, this comprehensive plan establishes the following goals.

Goal 1. Encourage sustainable development principles in the creation of new commercial parcels and buildings as well as in the renovation of existing commercial parcels and buildings.

Goal 2: Improve commercial signs so they reflect the character of the city and the character of particular neighborhoods

Goal 3: Develop a plan for universal broadband access

Goal 4: Encourage arts and culture as an integral part of Auburn's economy

### **Creating a Welcoming Community**



Image is fundamentally important to economic success. People form their first opinions of Auburn at its gateways; that is, at the entrances to the city and to downtown. Major corridors serve the same function, introducing people to the city and its cultural or commercial offerings.

The degree to which a community takes care of this "first impression" can say a lot to visitors and potential investors about the values of residents and businesses. Gateways also provide a sense of arrival to a community for visitors as well as returning residents. Finally, gateways offer an opportunity to change traffic patterns, particularly to slow traffic that might be traveling at a high rate of speed outside of city limits.



There are primary gateways for Auburn from the north, south, east and west. From the north, visitors from the Thruway (I-90) are greeted by a series of unkempt signs and properties. From the south, the historic nature of the Harriet Tubman Home hints at the municipality beyond. From the east, a high quality of life is on display along the landscaped divided boulevard of E. Genesee Street. Getting into the city from the west is more problematic as most travelers end up on the Routes 5 & 20 arterial.

Creating a more welcoming community requires a series of strategies that reshape the physical appearance at borders and along main corridors. The goals that push towards achieving this part of the vision are as follows.

Goal 1. Create a more welcoming environment for visitors and improve the experience of arriving in Auburn.

Goal 2. Develop a comprehensive system for directing people into and around Auburn.

### **Re-engaging the Owasco River**



Rivers built the industrial cities of New York. They provided water, power and means of transportation. 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; they prove to be important attractions and gathering places.

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 economic, but still important role in the re-development of Auburn. Waterfront land is typically the most valuable land in a community and will interest people wishing to invest in the city.

*Recreation Potential.* Another economic aspect of the river is its use as a place for fishing, walking or biking. The river, in and of itself, will probably not attract many visitors, though a well-designed park system can be a regional draw. More importantly, increased water access and the opening of a greenway along the river can boost 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.

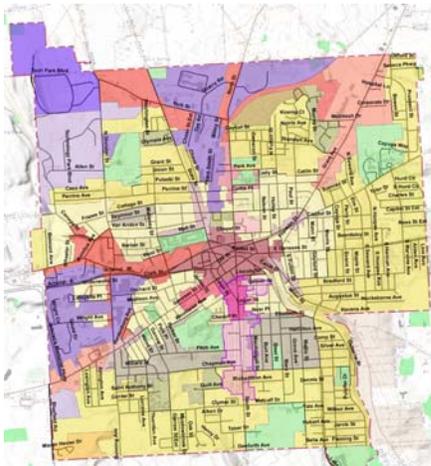
Unfortunately, most residents at the public meetings admitted extremely limited knowledge of the Owasco River. They recognized the river's potential, but had little understanding of the Owasco. A visual survey along the river revealed a variety of promising opportunities as well as challenges. Re-engaging the river will require that the community achieve the following goals.

Goal 1. Reconnect people to the river

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

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

### **Simplifying & Improving Development**



One of the important themes developed during the crafting of this comprehensive plan has been the notion that the city's rules and regulations should make it easy for the private sector to give the community what it wants. This reflects the understanding that growth comes from private developers. It is the city's role to set the stage for growth and ensure it adheres to a community vision.

In Auburn, as in so many cities, the zoning and other land use regulations have become convoluted and outdated over time. Years of piecemeal changes meant to address particular issues create inconsistencies and, most importantly, promote development patterns not consistent with Auburn's urban and historic character.

A confusing code, that is at odds with a community vision, makes development time-consuming, difficult and costly. The private sector needs to get projects built quickly in order to maximize profit. A clear set of rules to which all projects are held and that are easy to understand is the best way for a community to speed up quality projects. The standards can be high, but they must be easy to meet.

Just as importantly, rules can become muddled if deviations are allowed. In limited circumstances variances or other changes in regulations are appropriate. But too many changes risk turning the development process into a free-for-all. This hurts the community environmentally, economically and in terms of character preservation. It



also hurts developers because, in such an atmosphere, public pressure and politics intervene to slow or stop projects – even good ones.

This chapter has set out the following goals.

Goal 1. Review and revise zoning rules to make it easy for private developers to undertake projects that fit Auburn's urban, historic, cultural and environmental vision.

Goal 2. Improve operations of the planning and zoning boards.

Goal 3. Adopt policies that promote arts and culture as economic development.

Goal 4. Make municipal operations more environmentally and economically sustainable.

### **The Comprehensive Planning Process**

Cities must make choices. What kind of a community do residents want to live in? What kind of economic growth should be encouraged? Where and why? What should new businesses look like? Where should new neighborhoods be built? What should they look like?

Auburn residents, business owners and public officials have asked themselves these questions during the comprehensive planning process. The result is a vision and set of goals for the future and a plan, with specific strategies and a timetable for action, to achieve those goals and realize the vision.

This comprehensive plan is not an instruction manual. It gives some specific guidance, but, by and large, it serves a broader policy purpose. Auburn's comprehensive plan establishes a vision and creates a framework for a community's success – for the city's economic and environmental sustainability. This plan gives decision makers and stakeholders (including elected officials, city and regional staff, planning and zoning board members, developers, property owners and citizens) a guide as they create new policies and judge new development projects. It also helps the community increase opportunities for grant money, as the state and federal government prefer to fund projects that fit into a plan for the future.

Auburn's comprehensive plan is a living document. The community must be alert to the need for changes and updates. It is important to remember, however, that adjusting the comprehensive plan does not mean lowering standards. The plan will not succeed if it is constantly changed to meet the demands of every particular project. Proposed changes should only be made if they further the plan's vision and goals. Otherwise, the city should review the plan about every five years.

This comprehensive plan, reviewed and approved by the planning board as well as the Auburn City Council, was crafted by a citizen advisory committee working



closely with the city's Office of Planning and Economic Development and planning consultant Saratoga Associates.

Public participation weaves itself through all aspects of the comprehensive planning process. Engaging the public, educating them about planning, and listening to their concerns, ideas, and dreams is crucial in developing a plan that will stand the test of time. In the Auburn comprehensive planning process, there were many opportunities for the public to become involved.

Saratoga Associates, the comprehensive plan consultant, ran an extensive public process for the plan. Public outreach included...

- > Two issues identification and visioning workshops were held on November 15 and on November 19, 2008. These well-attended workshops were followed up in February 2009 with a workshop for students engaged in the Blueprint II program. The main component of these workshops was a visual preference survey during which citizens rated images for their appropriateness in Auburn. A final, abbreviated visual preference survey was conducted during the Business Growth workshop.
- > Four topic-specific workshops were held on the following topics: Neighborhoods, Downtown Development/Arts, Owasco River and Business Growth. Each workshop was open to the public, but targeted audiences were also invited to each. The results of these workshops were an important source of ideas and information for the drafting of each chapter.
- > A community-wide update meeting, held on October 29, 2009, where the vision, goals and strategies of the master plan were presented for comment to the general public.

Reports about the public workshops can be found in the appendix to this comprehensive plan.



Hundreds of Auburn residents attended a series of public workshops to help create the vision, goals and strategies in this comprehensive plan.

