



Housing and neighborhoods in Auburn run the gamut from safe and desirable to very distressed. In many neighborhoods, housing quality and safety are top priorities. This chapter assesses the general condition of housing and neighborhoods in Auburn, sets policy goals and describes strategies that will make Auburn a more attractive place for a variety of people to live.

Safe and affordable housing is the bare minimum that a municipality should provide its residents. Cities with vibrant, desirable neighborhoods attract people who will live, work, shop and recreate in the community. High quality, 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 revitalization.

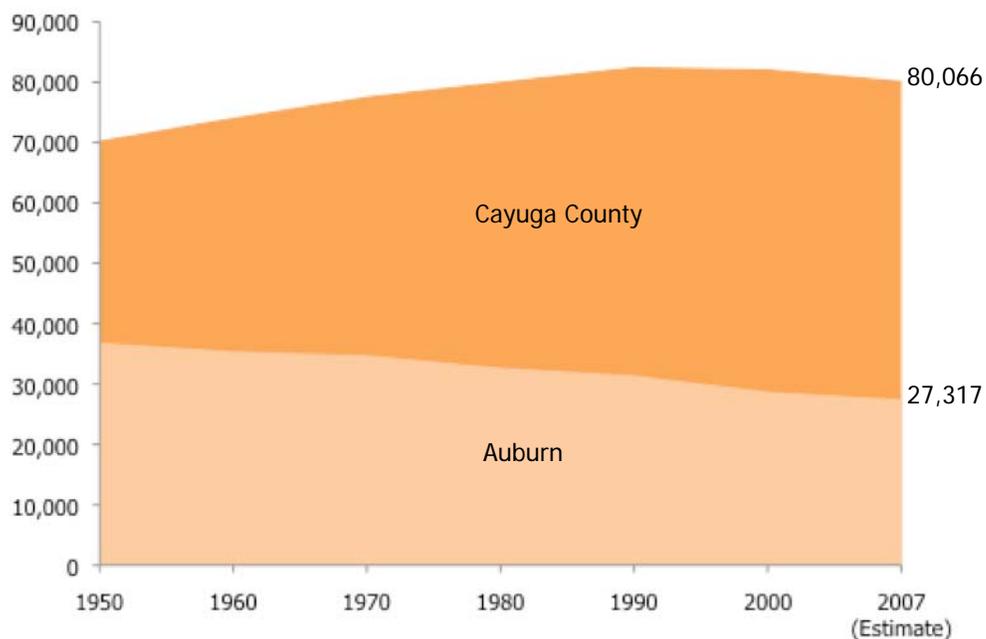
Housing and Neighborhoods today in Auburn

Since 1950, Auburn has been steadily – though slowly, losing population to approximately 27,000 in 2007. At the same time Cayuga County experienced moderate growth, which leveled in the 1990s and declined slightly by 2007. Whereas Auburn represented just about half of the county's population in 1950, it now represents just over one-third of the county.

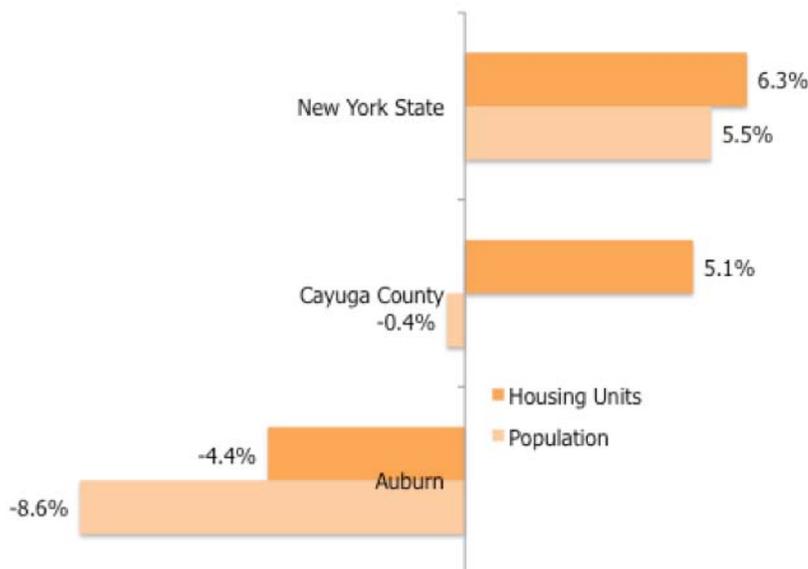
From 1990 to 2000, while Auburn lost both housing units and population, the county had sprawl without growth. Despite a 0.5 percent decline in population, the number of housing units in Cayuga County grew 5.1 percent. New York State, during the same time period, grew both in terms of population and housing units.



Auburn & Cayuga County Population Growth
 (Source: U.S. Census)



Change in Population and Housing Units: 1990 to 2000
 (Source: U.S. Census)





Housing

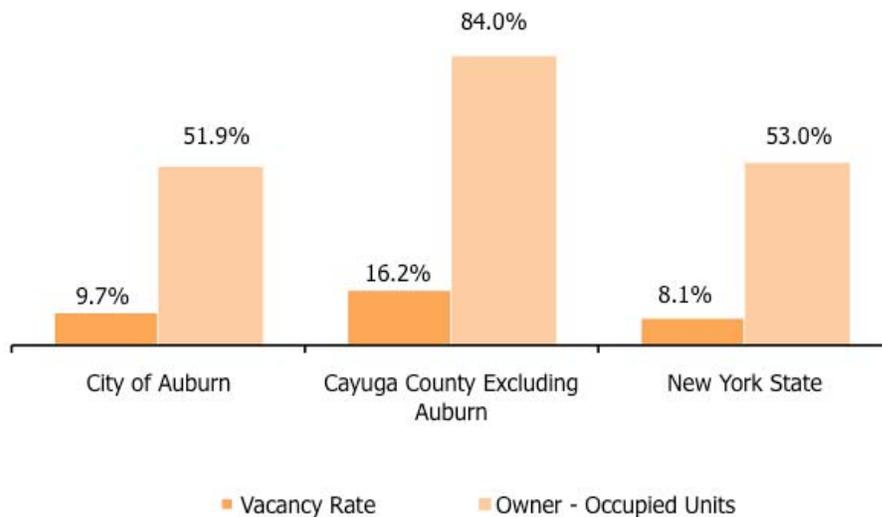
A community's housing stock and the owner-to-renter ratio are strong indicators of stability. Typically, a homeowner is more attentive to property maintenance than a renter or absentee landlord (either local or out-of-town). A homeowner also tends to remain in his or her home for a longer period of time than a renter, reducing the amount of turnover within a neighborhood. These and other factors contribute to the level of investment in a neighborhood and ultimately contribute to the value and character as well.

Auburn has a lower vacancy rate than the rest of Cayuga County, but higher than state levels. However, it should be noted that approximately 71 percent of the vacancies in Cayuga County excluding Auburn are considered seasonal or recreational vacancies, meaning that they are vacation homes, summer homes, and the like, and therefore are not viewed as a negative impact.

Also not surprising for an urban area, Auburn has lower levels of home ownership than both Cayuga County and the state. In public workshops, many residents expressed their concern about the number of absentee landlords in Auburn. However, it is equally important to note that rentals should not universally be portrayed as a negative aspect of a community. Rentals help keep a community diverse and can suit people who have more flexible housing needs—whether students, artists, seniors, or those not in a position to buy. Rentals, when done well, can be an asset to a community.

Housing units – Vacancy Rate and Owner-occupancy Rate: 2000

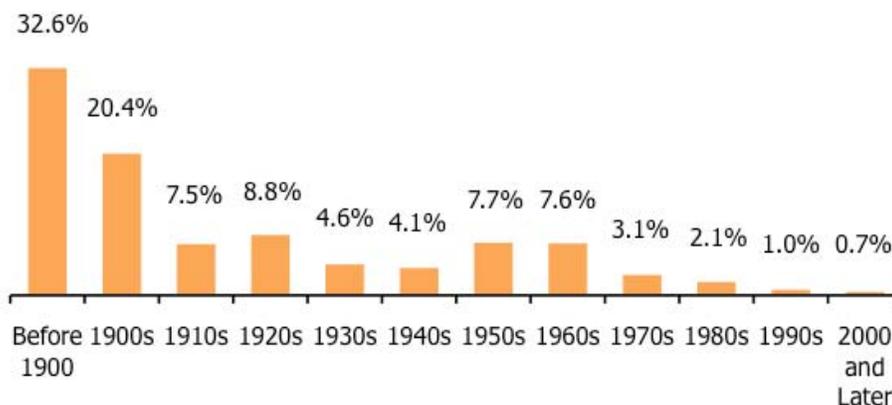
(Source: U.S. Census 2000)





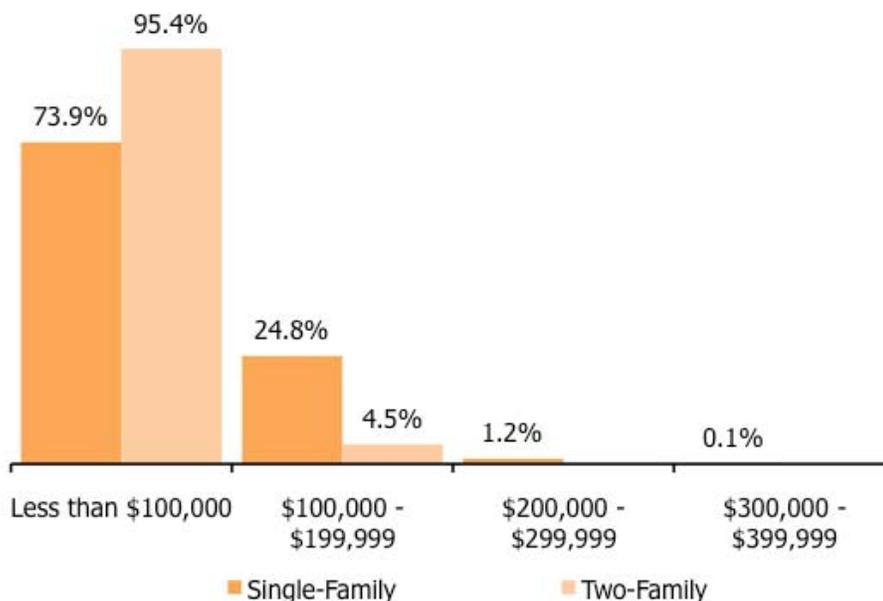
Auburn’s residential buildings tend to be older, with over half of them built before 1910. If properly maintained, older housing stock can be an asset to a community by preserving community character. However, it can also be a burden if regular upkeep is not performed, as is the case in many areas of Auburn.

Year of Construction, Residential Buildings
(Source: City of Auburn Assessor 2008 data)



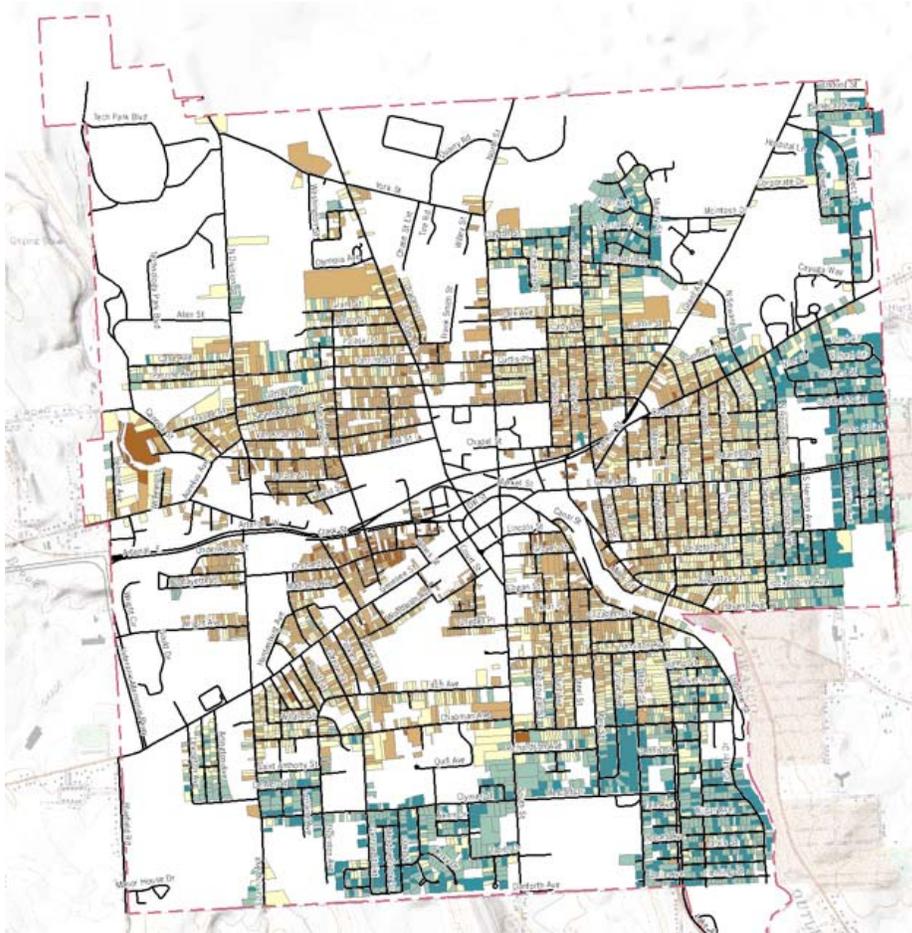
Auburn’s housing values are fairly low, with very few homes worth more than \$200,000. The majority of both one- and two-family homes are worth less than \$100,000. No homes were valued at more than \$399,999.

Housing Values
(Source: City of Auburn Assessor 2008 data)





Not surprisingly, higher valued properties tend to be the newer ones on the outskirts of town. As shown on the following chart, those residential buildings closer to downtown have lower per square foot values according to the city assessor's office.



The map is a rough estimate of per square foot housing values. It was derived from the city assessor's database and is not meant to show individual property values. Instead it clearly shows a citywide pattern of lower values (darker browns and tans) in the older houses near downtown and higher values (darker blues) in more recent developments further from the center.

The following challenges face Auburn's residential areas:

- > Neighborhoods that are difficult or unsafe for pedestrians to navigate
- > Deteriorating quality of life in some areas
- > Conversion of single-family homes into multiple units
- > Lack of higher-end, market rate units near downtown

These are the main challenges identified during the comprehensive planning process – and they are typical issues facing a community, such as Auburn, which has experienced extensive disinvestment over the past few decades. Vibrant, interesting and safe places to live are key to long-term economic sustainability.



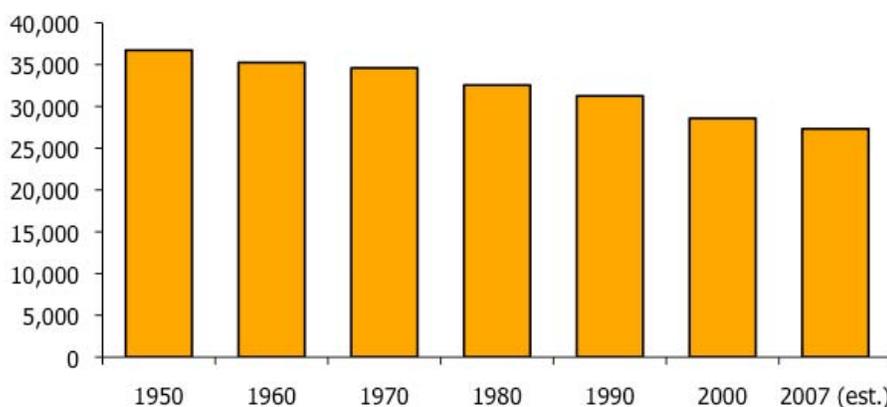
Goal 1. Encourage the location and form of new development to emphasize pedestrians and protect neighborhood character

Strategy N1 – Focus new development and redevelopment efforts in and around downtown.

Since the middle of the 20th century, Auburn 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 other cities, this hollowing of the urban core has pushed more and more people to the suburbs (both in the city and in surrounding towns), rather than using and upgrading the existing community social fabric and physical infrastructure. This is unsustainable, both economically and environmentally.

Population Change, 1950 to 2007

(Source: U.S. Census)

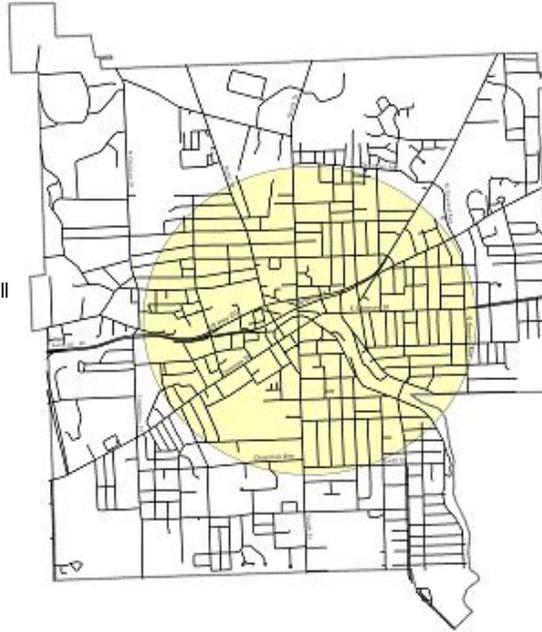


Downtown is the city's most valuable asset. The urban core's continued revitalization requires that people live within walking distance or a short drive of downtown. Getting people to move back to downtown and the surrounding areas will also make more efficient use of the streets, sewer lines and water pipes meant to serve a larger population.

The comprehensive plan targets a large area, centered on downtown and radiating out for about a mile, as the focus for redevelopment efforts. Identifying priority residential redevelopment opportunities within this will help eliminate sprawl, more efficiently utilizing existing infrastructure. This concentration will also support the re-creation of strong, vibrant neighborhoods. Providing incentives, tax breaks, or simply fast-tracking permitting or other approvals can help direct development to these areas.



Focusing development in downtown and the surrounding neighborhoods will support the revitalization of Auburn's urban core – the community's most important asset.



This recognition that development should be focused downtown is not to imply that it should be halted elsewhere. However, as valuable municipal human and fiscal resources are allocated to different redevelopment projects, one major priority needs to remain the revitalization of downtown.

Strategy N2 – Establish clear neighborhood zoning and design standards to encourage walkability.

In the public workshops, many residents noted that it was difficult to walk to many places around their neighborhoods. Some of the reasons are dealt with by Strategies N3 (community connectivity) and N4 (sidewalks).

Another important reason for the lack of walkability is the way that some new buildings, even homes, tend to make things more convenient for the automobile than the pedestrian. Rebuilding the social fabric of neighborhoods requires that people have the opportunity to interact. Person-to-person meetings cannot take place when people leave their homes, go directly to their cars and drive away.

To increase the opportunity for neighbor-to-neighbor interaction, the zoning in residential areas should emphasize three simple things.

- > Make human doors the focal point of the front of new houses, not garage doors. Unfortunately, with much new construction, garages are front and center. Entrances to homes should focus on people, not cars.



- > Reduce the front setbacks of new single-family and multi-family structures. Pedestrians are more comfortable walking if they are enclosed in what urban designers call a pedestrian envelope. The open spaces created by large front lawns are less inviting than the walking along a building façade, even one that is 15 to 25 feet away.
- > Encourage the construction of real front porches. Too often new homes are built to look like they have front porches, but if you look closely, there is no room to sit on them. Real front porches encourage people to sit on them and this is another opportunity for neighbors to see each other and visit.



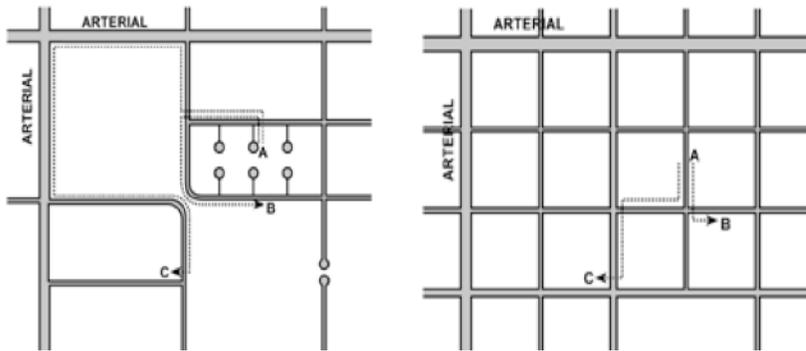
In public workshops, Auburn residents revealed a preference for homes with porches, set back garages and a front door focus (left photo). The right photo – with its unwelcoming garage, its distance from the street, and merely symbolic front doors – scored lower.

Strategy N3 – Require new subdivision developments adhere to and create an urban grid/block form

Communities need many kinds of connections for people to get around. Today, of course, car connections are vital. Unfortunately, land use patterns that have arisen in some parts of Auburn result in few connections. For example, cul-de-sacs – once the quintessential model of suburban development – are dead-ends on many levels.

Many residential areas are close on a map, but their design requires residents to climb in a car to get from one to the other. The lack of adequate connections turns what should be a walking or biking trip into a car trip; or it turns short vehicle trips into longer ones. The result is fewer people walking and biking, more people driving, and the vibrancy of a city is lost.

From a housing perspective, a street grid is fairer. People living on the end of a dead end street may enjoy less traffic, but the lack of connections means those further up the road get more traffic funneled by them. From an emergency services perspective, the multiple access to homes afforded by a grid means faster response times. Dead ends also increase congestion, and therefore air pollution and driver frustrations, because they squeeze all traffic out onto a few collector streets rather than allowing cars to filter through a balanced grid.



In both sketches, points A, B, and C are in approximately the same locations. But in the suburban layout on the left, travel distances increase and congestion grows as traffic is funneled onto major roads. Safety also declines with isolated subdivisions and dead-end streets. The traditional grid pattern on the right allows for more direct connections to places and more alternative routes for drivers and emergency vehicles. It also becomes a more interesting place to walk.

Since the creation of communities, grid patterns have proven a most efficient way to organize transportation. This is especially true in denser areas, where the grid creates connections between different neighborhoods and serves many purposes. Walking is more interesting when pedestrians can vary routes. Residents who walk get to know those in their neighborhood, therefore building a safer community. School children can find safe ways to schools, recreational activities and their friends without having to walk or bike along major arterials.

The big fear about connecting to a grid is the amount and speed of cut-through traffic. However, in well-designed neighborhoods, that is not an issue. Narrow streets, short blocks and stop signs at intersections curb speeders. Additional traffic calming techniques can also serve to protect neighborhoods from automobiles.

Auburn maintains the basic framework of an urban street grid in its center, but as one gets further away from downtown the grid is lost. The subdivision and zoning regulations should be revised to require more gridded and neighborhood street patterns. New developments should be required to leave sufficient rights of way to provide for future connections to neighboring developments. Sometimes connecting to the grid is impossible, particularly when up against environmental restrictions. However, even in these cases, a good design can almost always eliminate the need for dead ends.

Retrofitting existing subdivisions onto the street grid can be challenging. In some cases, it is possible. In most cases, however, the city may instead seek to find ways to make pedestrian and bicycle connections to activity centers using paths, utility right of ways, old train beds, unbuilt lots or other open spaces.



Strategy N4 — Continue to encourage sidewalks across the city and create a citywide sidewalk replacement plan that prioritizes the location for new walkways.

Sidewalks play an important role in a city such as Auburn — even in the less dense areas. They are one of the most important networks that binds the city together — getting people out of automobiles and helping to create community.

During the public meetings, many people recognized and described the value of sidewalks to Auburn. Most residents were concerned that there be safe places for their families to walk and that connections be made within residential neighborhoods and to other neighborhoods as well as commercial areas or other areas of activity — especially around schools.

There are numerous reasons to craft a plan for sidewalks that link together, creating a more interconnected system around Auburn. A few of these include the following.

Sidewalks are important for Auburn's children

The Auburn Enlarged City School District requires that children find their own way to school if they live within a mile of their school for elementary students, a mile and a half for middle schoolers and two miles for those in high school. At appropriate age-levels and maturity, students easily cover those distances on foot or bike. However, many parents will not and should not let their children walk if there is no sidewalk. In some places around Auburn, the city lacks sidewalks in close proximity to the school — de facto requiring that students be driven. This causes congestion, increases air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions and imposes higher fuel costs on family.

Also, encouraging children to walk and bike would be a major contributor to improving and maintaining their health. The New York State Department of Health estimates that one in three children are obese or overweight. New federal guidelines urge children to exercise 60 minutes per day, yet fewer than one in four kids get even 20 minutes — and about another quarter report no significant physical activity per day. By making it safe for children to walk to the places they already go — school, parks, shops — Auburn can make a positive contribution to public health.

Sidewalks distinguish Auburn from the suburbs

Sidewalks provide cities an important advantage over suburbs as they compete for residents. Many people seek dense, well-connected neighborhoods in which to live and raise a family. These people need a choice other than the suburban, car-oriented places. (The suburbs are the



choice of some people, who desire an auto-centric.) Providing sidewalks gives people this option and makes the city more attractive to them. It is one of the many ways that the city can stabilize its population and remain economically sustainable over the long-term.

Sidewalks are more environmentally sustainable

The most polluting time for an automobile occurs during the few minutes just after it is started. People in neighborhoods without sidewalks will, understandably, want to drive to run even short errands; trips so short that a car will not have had a chance to begin operating efficiently. Cutting out these shorter trips will benefit the entire community in lower air pollution and less congestion.

Sidewalks build community

An often-overlooked benefit of sidewalks is the neighbor-to-neighbor connections they foster. Walking to the store or to school or for exercise allows neighbors, particularly those that share little else in common, to meet and become acquainted. Communities tend to be more cohesive and safer when neighbors get to know one another. However, when all movement in and out of a house requires one to be in a car, that opportunity is missed.

Case Study – Cleveland, Ohio

In 2004, Cleveland Mayor Jane L. Campbell became aware of a “Walking School Bus” program that had been initiated by local activists around an elementary school. (A walking school bus is an organized group of children walking to school with one or more adults. It can be informal or include meeting points, timetables and regularly scheduled trained volunteers.) The mayor was looking for ways to get children to be more physically active and to decrease crime on the way to and from schools. After reviewing the success of the pilot program, the Mayor and her cabinet decided to implement the Walking School Bus program in over 100 schools citywide.

Case study – Sacramento, California

A non-profit institution (Walk Sacramento) initiated a partnership with the local school district to start a series of weekly walking Wednesdays. The coalition, through the skillful procurement of funding, made the streets surrounding schools safer for pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, and bus riders alike. The group has community-planning councils that provide advice and recommendations on new land use projects. Their role as an educational clearinghouse for communities was especially useful for the Natomas Unified



School District when the school board acted on a school bond measure. Natomas was the first school district in the United States to include infrastructure improvements around the school in a bond measure. The school district used the money for physical projects such as widening sidewalks, creating safer intersections, and making new crosswalks.

(Case study source: www.activelivingbydesign.org)

A walk to school guide, put out the by U.S. Centers for Disease Control can be found at: <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/kidswalk/pdf/kidswalk.pdf>

Over the last few years, the city has made great strides weaving its disparate sidewalks together. However, there are still areas where the networks of sidewalks are incomplete and/or difficult to navigate. This is particularly challenging for some of Auburn's children, senior and disabled residents – those who may rely on walking or biking or want to use other means of transport besides the car. For this and the reasons above, the City should create a citywide pedestrian sidewalk plan. This plan should identify areas of existing sidewalks in need of replacement and identify areas in the City for the installation of sidewalks.

Sidewalk Installation Priorities:

While the Comprehensive Plan takes a big picture look at addressing the needs of pedestrians within the City, a sidewalk plan would be a detailed logical approach to the replacement and installation of sidewalks. The Office of Planning and Economic Development should develop a plan with priorities for sidewalk replacement and installation based on the following considerations:

- > Areas around school buildings, parks and recreation areas;
- > Streets that link neighborhoods to shopping areas and other activity centers;
- > Neighborhoods with a higher traffic volume; and
- > Where a sidewalk effort will complete a local network; and
- > The availability of potential State and Federal monies.

These considerations will assist in the prioritization of sidewalk projects, which will be brought to the Auburn City Council and the neighborhoods identified.

The City will focus the installation of sidewalks based on the availability of Federal and State resources, including but not limited to the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development's Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) and the Department of Transportation's Safe Routes to School Program. CDBG can only be used as an "area benefit" in areas where more than 51% of the population is low to moderate income (as determined by available Census data).

When there is the opportunity to install new sidewalks in areas where necessary or grant resources are available the planning should involve three groups: The



Office of Planning and Economic Development, the Auburn City Council and the neighborhood where the sidewalks are being proposed. Involvement and communication should, at a minimum, look like this:

- > City's Planning Office identify areas based on considerations above;
- > Auburn City Council address the request from the City's Planning Office;
- > Notify and engage the neighborhood; which may include mailing registered letters to property owners, leafleting the affected area and/or hosting a Public Hearing;
- > The City Planning Office will then present findings to the City Council; and
- > The City Council will make the final decision on the installation of sidewalks based on community input and planning materials available.

The City should also review policies and outreach regarding sidewalks to ensure individual property owners are not over-burdened by the cost of sidewalk improvements. The City's code requirement that property owners install sidewalks in the public right-of-way has been an important part of the community's sidewalk success so far. However, this has been challenging to some property owners who live on corner lots, in areas where there have been no sidewalks or those property owners who have limited means to replace or install sidewalk. As such, the City will need to do more to advertise programs currently available to property owners including the Direct Benefit Sidewalk program for income eligible homeowners (funded through the City's Community Development Block Grant) and the 5-year low interest loan for both business and homeowners.

Additionally, to further develop the City's objective in creating walkable neighborhoods, while not unfairly impacting property owners financially, the City should create opportunities for the installation of sidewalk through public and private resources based on City priorities and neighborhood need. The City Council should also consider and implement other creative financing opportunities beyond the programs currently in place to assist all property owners with the replacement and installation of new sidewalk; such programs could include but not be limited to shared financing or distributed costs.

It is important to include City of Auburn's City Council throughout the sidewalk planning process, as the City Council is responsible for the final decision regarding the installation of new sidewalks in identified neighborhoods based on community input and planning information available.



Strategy N5 – Undertake a Safe Routes to School program

In 1969, about half of all students in the United States walked or bicycled to school. Today, fewer than 15 percent do, one-quarter ride a school bus, and over half are driven in private cars or drive themselves. This decline in walking and bicycling increases traffic congestion and pollution around schools. Also, those children who lead sedentary lifestyles tend to have a variety of health problems such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease.

However, no parent will let their child walk or bike to school if it is not safe. The federal Safe Routes to School Program aims to make walking and bicycling to school a safe and routine activity once again. The program funds a wide variety of programs and projects, from building safer street crossings to establishing programs that encourage children and their parents to walk and bicycle safely to school. The City of Auburn could coordinate with the school district to develop and deliver these programs.

The National Center for Safe Routes to School is a University of North Carolina program funded by the Federal Highway Administration. It offers strategies for making walking and bicycling to school easier in terms of engineering, education, enforcement, encouragement and student drop-off and pick-up. These solutions can be found at <http://www.saferoutesinfo.org/guide/>.



Safe Routes to Schools Program would offer strategies for making walking and bicycling to school easier in terms of education, enforcement, encouragement and engineering. *(Photo credit: www.pedbikeimages.org / Dan Burden)*

Strategy N6 – Transform the commercial zone and the R-3 PDD into a mixed-use, traditional neighborhood zoning district along the route of the new John Walsh Boulevard off of North Street at York.

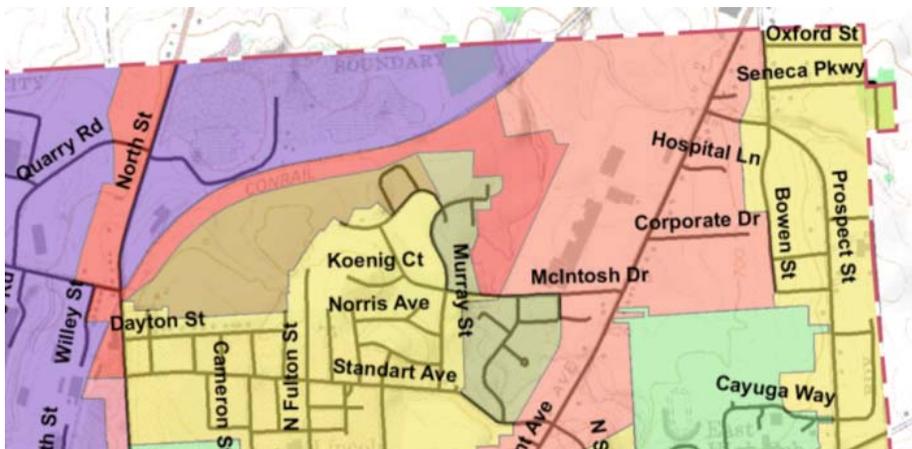
There are plans for a new street to eventually run east off of North Street near the present intersection of North Street and York Street. (The approximate route of the road would be located within the red color on the map below. It is a commercial district heading east off of North Street just above Dayton Street.)

The primary goal of the John Walsh Boulevard project is to connect NYS Route 5 to NYS Route 34. Additionally, the reconstruction of York Street will extend this corridor to N. Division Street and terminate just north of Technology Park. The



project is designed to alleviate residential traffic congestion on the northeast portion of the city, reroute existing heavy truck routes away from the center city, open up new commercial, residential and industrial lands for development, and expand the city's sales and property tax bases. Constructing the new roadway developed as a part of the 1991 City of Auburn Comprehensive Plan.

In anticipation of this new road, the area along it has been made a commercial zoning district (red on the map below) and the land just south of it has been placed into a planned development district zone (tan on the map). The area should be rezoned.



The results of building as called for by these zoning districts would perpetuate the low-density sprawl that is not in keeping with Auburn's urban or historic character. It calls for suburban style commercial buildings and housing densities more suited to conservation (cluster) subdivisions with lots of open space. These represent car-centric, not necessarily pedestrian friendly forms of growth.

Instead, the code for all of these areas should encourage dense and mixed-use development. The designs should mimic traditional neighborhoods with buildings along the main road coming right up to the street, parking lots behind buildings and well-landscaped sidewalks. Off of the new main road, connecting streets should become part of the existing city grid as much as possible. Housing forms should encourage walkability following the guidance described in Strategies N2 and N3 above. The new areas should exemplify Auburn's commitment to sustainability and adhere to standards described in Strategies N5, N6, N7 and N9 below. Of particular concern is that roads be narrow, walkable and that traffic on streets goes slowly through residential areas.

The goal of this new large-scale development opportunity should be to create a live/work place that offers something interesting to the creative class of entrepreneurs and workers would will start and staff 21st century business.



Goal 2. Encourage environmentally friendly homes and neighborhoods

Strategy N7 – Provide incentives for LEED-certified homes

LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Green Building Rating System® is a voluntary, consensus-based standard for building high-performance, sustainable buildings. Issues addressed by LEED include sustainable site planning and indoor environmental quality, green roof technologies, Energy Star-compliant roofing materials, geothermal (renewable) energy sources, sustainable wood, purchase of goods manufactured within a 500-mile radius, and innovative wastewater technologies. LEED projects get rated as: certified, silver, gold or platinum.

Auburn could offer incentives, such as density bonuses or streamlined permitting, to encourage construction of LEED-certified residential units. Giving developers the potential to build more square footage in certain areas of the city or enabling them to move more quickly through the permitting process could help increase density in areas, such as downtown Auburn, while addressing the city's sustainability goals. (Certain areas of the city, including downtown, should be designated as targets for density bonuses as increased density may not be appropriate everywhere.) The city should also consider such bonuses for projects that meet LEED standards but do not necessarily go through the process – and expense – of receiving official certification.

Strategy N8 – Revise subdivision regulations and zoning code to require that new housing developments have low impact on the environment and maintain the character of the community.

Development patterns based on conventional zoning codes often result in sprawl with its associated large impervious areas, loss of natural areas, and alteration of hydrologic systems. Conventional developments commonly contain wide roads and lots of parking. These large impervious areas prevent water from infiltrating the ground and replenishing groundwater and supporting nearby wetlands and streams. Conventional landscaping brings additional concerns including the introduction of non-native plants, use of herbicides, pesticides and fertilizers – which runoff into waterbodies – and excessive water consumption. Typically, residential designers try to deal with water runoff by constructing expensive stormwater controls such as catch basins, pipes and detention ponds.

New projects – greenfield as well as infill – should have as little impact on the environment as possible. This includes stormwater runoff, water and energy use, sustainable materials, and numerous other elements. Stormwater runoff is a major source of water pollution. During rainstorms stormwater runoff washes over impervious surfaces, such as roads, sidewalks and rooftops – increasing in temperature and carrying pollutants such as phosphorus, nitrogen, oil and grease, and pathogens to rivers, lakes and wetlands. This “nonpoint” source of pollution (because it does not



come out of a single location such as a pipe) can result in degraded water, blocked fish passage, fish kills, loss of wetlands, degraded aesthetics, and impaired recreation.

Low Impact Development (LID) is a stormwater management approach to development with the basic principle of modeling nature and mimicking a site's predevelopment water systems. Instead of managing and treating stormwater in large, costly end-of-pipe facilities, LID technology employs small, cost-effective landscape features often located at the lot level. LID allows for development with fewer environmental impacts through smarter designs and technologies that better balance conservation, growth, public health and quality of life. LID benefits the municipality, the developer, and the general public – through cost savings to developers, smaller burden on municipal infrastructure and reduced pollution to drinking water, recreational waterways and wetlands. Some of the LID best management practices include:

- > Permeable pavers
- > Porous surfaces
- > Tree box planters
- > Green roofs
- > Rain gardens
- > Grassed swales
- > Native plants
- > Open space conservation
- > Narrower streets
- > Shorter driveways
- > Smaller, better landscaped parking areas
- > Storage / reuse of rainwater

Strategy N9 – Provide general landscaping standards that encourage native plants and those requiring less watering

Using native plants in landscaping, buffers, and other vegetated areas, have multiple benefits, including:

- > Reduced landscape installation and maintenance costs;
- > Avoidance of the use of lawn chemicals such as fertilizers and herbicides;
- > Reduced or eliminated costs for irrigation systems;
- > Improved habitat and increased biodiversity;
- > Distinctive and attractive sites;
- > Improved water quality and reduced damages from stormwater;
- > Improved outdoor recreation and education opportunities; and
- > Strengthened environmental stewardship.

Auburn should compile a list of native plants that are acceptable for landscaping and work with the Auburn Beautification Commission, local garden groups, the Cornell Cooperative Extension and others to maximize compliance.



Strategy N10 – Support urban gardens and agriculture in vacant and soon-to-be vacant lots



Urban gardens in formerly vacant lots improve aesthetics, safety, and community.
(Source: www.healthylivingny.com)

Vacant land in the middle of a city can be an eyesore – unattractive fences, trash, overgrown weeds, and the like. However, many communities – from Cincinnati to Houston to Philadelphia – have been taking advantage of these pockets of land, realizing that there are viable alternatives for parcels that are awaiting development or redevelopment. Community gardens in vacant lots are a way to beautify the area, bring neighbors together, and sometimes even create revenue. During one of the public meetings, a resident suggested that every vacant lot in Auburn should be planted with sunflowers as a natural and artistic statement.

At the micro level, neighbors can use the even small parcels for flowers, shrubs, and the like. On a larger scale, entire city blocks can be turned into urban farms. Brooklyn's Red Hook Community Farm, built on what used to be an asphalt lot, now supplies vegetables to local restaurants and educates local teenagers about the environment, gardening, and nutritious food. In Montreal, the city provides owners of vacant lots tax-free status for five-year periods providing that the lot supports a significant community garden.

Historically, many community gardens have been constructed on long-vacant land without permission, but cities have learned to adapt their laws to accommodate garden development – sometimes permanently, such as on city-owned property. Sometimes gardens grow with the understanding that development activities will eventually take precedence. Auburn can utilize existing block associations or form designated garden committees to work with the city to encourage community gardens throughout the city.

For additional resources on planning and maintaining community gardens, visit <http://communitygarden.org/learn/starting-a-community-garden.php>.

Strategy N11 – Partner with the Auburn Beautification Commission to undertake an urban forestry plan.

The Auburn Beautification is in the early stages of developing an urban forestry initiative for Auburn. Plans include an inventory of city trees and the creation of a plan for planting additional trees. The City of Auburn should support these efforts with financial and human resources.

Trees are the most visible part of a healthy ecosystem. Standing in the shade of a large maple or picnicking in a grove of pines, it is easy to understand the value of a tree. But a personal respite from the sun is only one of the many values that trees bring to the natural and built environment. In Auburn, tree protection and tree planting helps accomplish the following:

- > Stabilization of soil thereby preventing erosion and sedimentation;



- > Slowing of water flowing into man-made retention systems reducing building costs
- > Reduction of stormwater runoff and the damage it may create;
- > Removal of pollutants from the air and water, and assistance in the generation of oxygen;
- > Sequestration of carbon – a potent greenhouse gas;
- > Creation of buffers and screens against visual and noise pollution;
- > Control of drainage and restoration of denuded soil subsequent to construction or grading;
- > Creation of habitat for birds and other wildlife;
- > Sustainable production of timber and other woodland products;
- > Creation of shade and shelter for people;
- > Protection and enhancement of property values; and
- > Conservation and enhancement of the town's aesthetic appearance.

For many of these services, the mechanics of trees in the city environment are simple to understand. Leaves and branches catch rainwater, some of which evaporates and some of which soaks into the ground reducing the amount that must be managed by expensive man-made management systems. Also, trees not only cool people and the homes they shade, but also the air shaded under their leaves. This air flows through the surrounding environment bringing down neighborhood temperatures.

How effective are trees at providing these services? In Atlanta researchers measured a ten-degree difference between a treeless airport and a nearby tree-rich neighborhood. In Denver trees cool the city enough to save \$4.5 million every year in energy costs. The urban forest also delivers stormwater management equivalent to a \$21 million



The cooling shade, which saves energy, is only one of the many benefits trees provide in communities. They also help manage stormwater, reduce air pollution and sequester CO₂ emissions as well as increase quality of life and make a place more beautiful.

treatment facility while cleansing 870,000 tons of carbon and 2.2 million pounds of other pollutants valued at \$5.3 million dollars. In Houston, tree benefits total about \$1.5 billion a year.⁸ A five-city study looked at tree-provided energy savings, CO₂ reductions,

⁸ Homsy, George. 2001. "Trees as Service Providers; Advocates Calculate the Advantages" (), *Planning*, Volume 67, Issue 8 (August) p. 31



improved air quality, stormwater runoff benefits and aesthetics. It found that for every dollar invested in trees, communities reap annual returns ranging from \$1.37 to \$3.09.⁹

Aggressive planting is an important sustainable strategy for the city. Auburn should integrate tree-planting requirements into site design from the beginning of the development process and work with applicants to encourage trees. It could consider waiving or being more flexible for certain zoning requirements, such as setbacks, if the applicant intends to plant a significant number of trees.

On a more ambitious level, the city could develop a tree-planting plan along the lines of "Million Trees NYC," a New York City program that sets goals for new street and park trees. Such programs are a great way to rally the community to invest in neighborhoods. To help fund this, Auburn could apply for funding from programs such as the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Urban Forestry Grants as well as use donated trees, city labor and volunteers.

There are many opportunities to plant trees. The city, working with the Auburn Beautification Commission, should aggressively find places, such as along roadways and in public parking areas, for tree planting. As repaving and other maintenance projects are undertaken on any city-owned property, the goal should be to add more trees to the project site than were there when it started. The municipal government in this, as in many other areas, can set an example for the private sector.

Auburn should make sure not to look at traditional "green" areas when seeking places for trees. It is important to look at turning "grey" areas, such as parking lots, as green as possible. Trees can play an important role in cooling large stretches of asphalt – lowering cooling costs, managing stormwater and increasing aesthetic quality. Ordinances should include a requirement that all parking lots achieve a LEED 2.0 rating system standard of planting trees to shade 30 percent of a parking lot in five years.

Strategy N12 – Encourage the reuse of existing historic buildings

A significant component of Auburn's appeal lies in its historic buildings, particularly downtown, but also in neighborhoods across the city. Part of what makes the city so unique is its history of invention, arts, and creativity – the built environment of Auburn should showcase this, to attract new visitors and residents, and to retain existing ones. Reusing historic buildings not only retains this valuable character, but also serves an environmental purpose: it significantly reduces waste, as well as the production and transport of new construction materials.

⁹ McPherson, Greg, et.al. 2005. "Municipal Forest Benefits and Costs in Five US Cities," *Journal for Forestry*, (December), p.411.



Historic structures give Auburn a distinctive character. Building preservation and reuse should be encouraged in downtown as well as around the entire city.

Auburn can encourage reuse in a number of ways. It can provide incentives (tax benefits, fast track permitting, etc.) to developers who reuse all or part of existing buildings. This could potentially be combined with incentives for LEED-certified buildings, in which reuse is one way to earn credits. The city can better promote and increase participation in its façade improvement program to help historic building owners upgrade or maintain their façades. Funding for such programs can come from sources such as the New York Main Street grant program, which can be used to fund projects in downtown.

Auburn can also choose to take a more advisory role (or hire historic preservation consultants to do so) to educate and inform building owners of their reuse and preservation options. This could be regarding the physical development issues, or matters regarding the uses of such buildings, such as how to activate the second floors of historic buildings. One place to turn is to host a workshop by the Preservation League of New York State. The Preservation League developed a program consisting of a workshop and a grant award made available to communities facing the issue of upper floor vacancies. The program brings together experts to help municipal officials and building owners understand building code, design and financial strategies to make it all work.¹⁰

Goal 3. Improve the quality of life of existing neighborhoods

Strategy N13 – Encourage neighborhood volunteer organizations (e.g. Auburn Beautification Commission)

It is quite evident from the public workshops that residents have a great deal of pride in Auburn. Some of this is manifested in various neighborhood groups – all volunteer run organizations that strive to make Auburn a better place to live, physically, spiritually, and culturally.

¹⁰ More information about the Preservation League and its programs is available at www.preservenys.org.



Volunteerism always has a connection to civic pride. In difficult economic times, when government resources may be stretched thin, volunteer organizations play an even more vital role in the success of Auburn. Auburn should encourage such groups in whatever ways possible, such as providing meeting space, posting announcements on the City website, helping with publicity, and working with representatives from neighborhood groups to achieve their goals.

Strategy N14 – Implement a Landlord Registry Program.

Absentee landlords are one of Auburn residents' prime concerns regarding the quality of their neighborhoods. Many homes, particularly in the center of Auburn's older neighborhoods, are poorly maintained – with problems ranging from peeling paint and piling up trash to larger structural issues. Particularly when concentrated in certain neighborhoods this contributes to an overall sense of disinvestment in the community, both aesthetically and economically.

Many landlords, including out-of-town ones, are excellent stewards of their property. However, there are many problem landlords across the city. Naturally, it is easier for municipal officials and law enforcement to deal with landlords who live locally. Therefore, the city should adopt a new registration program for owners of multi-family dwellings. This program is more fully described in a report completed by Bond, Schoeneck and King titled "Aligning Auburn City Building, Housing, Fire and Zoning Codes." This will make information distribution and code enforcement easier as there will be someone the city can turn to when issues rise with a particular property.

Case study – Schenectady, New York

Schenectady, New York, recently passed a law requiring all rental property owners to register their local contact information (including business and mobile numbers) with the building inspector's office. Landlords living outside of the city must have a local contact. The goal is to keep landlords accountable and raise the quality of their properties. In addition, it helps city officials with emergencies – everything from building code violations to criminal activity. If landlords do not register, or register with false information, they can be subject to fines of up to \$500 per week.

Strategy N15 – Increase code enforcement activities in neighborhoods

Revisions to the city's regulations are important, but without proper enforcement they are useless. Poorly maintained yards, sidewalks covered with snow, piles of trash or large discarded items and overcrowded buildings directly contribute to quality of life and safety issues within a community. This is especially true in already distressed neighborhoods.



Broad and consistent enforcement will send the signal to landlords that the city is serious about violations. The problem, of course, is a matter of resources. Troublesome property owners may ignore first citations anticipating that the city will not have the resources, political will or stamina to pursue violations further. Auburn should make sure that the human and fiscal resources are in place to soundly disabuse them of that hope.

The city, especially the Code Enforcement Office and planning and zoning boards, needs to improve the enforcement process for existing and new construction. Revisions may include imposing more severe penalties and/or writing a fine and fee schedule into the code. Fines should be substantial so that property owners or developers do not simply absorb penalties as a cost of doing business. The fines should be an incentive to obey the rules and fix problems. The city should increase its inspection staff and provide training for these employees.

Finally, as appropriate, the Auburn should implement the recommendations contained in the report, "Aligning Auburn City Building, Housing, Fire and Zoning Codes."

Strategy N16 – Craft a vacant building initiative

Owing in part to its population decline as well as to the recent economic downturn, Auburn contains many vacant buildings. Vacant buildings are unsightly – attracting rodents and trash – as well as potentially unsafe – creating opportunities for crime. Too many vacant buildings can contribute to the decline of property values and the overall loss of a sense of community. Cities such as St. Louis and Chicago have promoted vacant building initiatives as ways of controlling the most negative aspects of the problem; Auburn should explore doing the same.

A vacant building initiative would require owners to:

- > Register with the city and pay a yearly administrative fee
- > Post owner or agent contact information on the outside of buildings
- > Maintain liability insurance for vacant property
- > Secure all entrances of vacant properties to prevent theft or squatting

As with all city regulations, enforcement would be key to the success of a vacant building initiative. Programs encouraging historic building reuse and homeownership will help to reduce the number of vacant buildings in Auburn; the vacant building initiative would address those buildings that remain and help ensure they do not become scars on the neighborhood.

Strategy N17 – Develop a homeownership program

The home-buying process can be very complicated. It is particularly bewildering if prospective homeowners have little experience with credit, mortgages, loans,



home inspections and/or similar challenges that face every homebuyer. First time homebuyers often do not access special mortgages and financing, government grants, loans and other assistance simply because they do not know what is available. Given the recent subprime mortgage crisis, navigating the homebuying process has become even more complex and intimidating.

Auburn should create a resource (a "HomeStore") that provides advisory services to those seeking to become homeowners. The Auburn HomeStore could be a central resource for prospective buyers to learn about living in different city neighborhoods, obtaining a mortgage, fixing their credit, or finding an incentive program for purchase or rehabilitation. Other municipalities have created similar clearinghouses with great success. This would centralize resources to create an approachable, informative clearinghouse.

Strategy N18 – Improve incentives to re-convert homes to single-family and discourage the conversion of single-family homes to multiple dwellings.

The conversion of large single-family homes into multiple apartments is an attempt by some owners to maximize the economic value of their property. In some cases, the incomes from various apartments might be necessary to ensuring property maintenance on low value structures. However, as practiced in Auburn, the cumulative impact of the conversions has been negative, including overcrowding, increased criminal activity, increased traffic and parking problems and continually deteriorating buildings. In addition, in a weak real estate market such as Auburn, there is no need for the additional supply of units driving down prices and making it harder for quality landlords to maintain their buildings.

The city has programs to encourage property owners to turn these converted multi-unit structures back into single-family homes. These programs include a low-interest or no-interest loan for income eligible applicants and a property tax exemption that phases in the value of the improvements over an eight-year period. So far, no one has taken advantage of these programs to reduce the number of units in a structure. The city needs to revisit the program and find out why it is unsuccessful. Some questions to examine include:

- > Is the program promoted well? Does it reach the right people? There is nothing on the city's website about the program. A mailing to all property owners boasting of the program might help catch the notice of those people inclined to reconvert.
- > Is the incentive large enough? Perhaps the incentive should be increased. One strategy might include dramatically reducing property taxes for a period of ten years.
- > Is there too much paperwork? Or is there a perception that applying for the money is too onerous? Sometimes people, even if there is a significant



advantage, fear the bureaucracy. Marketing materials should ensure people that qualified city-staff will help them through the process. This may be one of the tasks assigned to a HomeStore. (See strategy N17.)

- > Is the program restricted to owner-occupied dwellings? Such a restriction may severely limit the pool of potential properties. An existing absentee landlord – the presumed majority of owners of such property – would be excluded. If the market incentives were correct, then having such a person reconvert the property and then rent it to a family would be a very acceptable outcome.

The city should also step up inspections of these properties since they tend to be a greater source of building problems. The increased cost of inspections and violations to property owners will make alternatives to the status quo look more appealing. It must cost more to do the wrong thing than to do the right thing.

Finally, the city might realize that other factors may be required to spark reconversions. Stronger neighborhoods and higher property values will probably drive the change more than a city-based incentive program. Increasing the quality of life in these neighborhoods via other strategies in this plan may do more to stabilize the area than reconversions of buildings to single-family.

Strategy N19 – Educate about and enforce sidewalk maintenance standards

Sidewalk maintenance directly impacts a city's overall walkability and connectivity. If just one section of sidewalk is impassable or unsafe, connections between neighborhoods can be severed. Sidewalk maintenance includes concrete/paved surfaces (cracked or uneven surfaces are not only unsightly but also hazardous), tree pruning (both on the sides as well as above), snow removal, and trash pickup. Sidewalk maintenance standards must be enforced more thoroughly across the city.

However, residents and landowners may not be aware of current sidewalk standards in Auburn, or the procedures and tools available to help meet these standards. Per Auburn's municipal code, the property owner is responsible for the maintenance of the sidewalks – including repairs, snow removal, litter pickup and tree/hedge pruning. For those facing repairs, it is important to publicize the city's sidewalk program, which lets residents who choose to repair (or are required to repair) their sidewalks to pay for this work through their taxes over a five-year period. The city engineering department contracts for the repair work through an open competitive bid process.

In addition, residents may report unsafe sidewalk conditions to the city – and have them remedied. If property owners do not take care of the problem, then the city will remedy the situation and add the bill for services to their property tax bill.

As part of Strategy N4, the city should establish an outreach program to regularly inform landowners of their responsibility for sidewalk maintenance. The outreach



may be in the form of an occasional brochure coupled with recurring reminders on the city website.

The city should also lead by example and ensure that its own properties – from city hall to maintenance buildings – are adequately maintained. Also, city staff, especially those charged with clearing snow from the roads, will have to make adjustments that will not make resident efforts to keep sidewalks clear more difficult by mounting up snow on walks and at corners. By taking the time and/or money to perform such tasks, the city will demonstrate its commitment to making Auburn a better place to live.

Strategy N20 – Implement traffic calming in residential areas, where speed is excessive.

Within neighborhoods, according to people who attended the public meetings, an important concern is slowing traffic. The city can implement physical changes, signage and other strategies to slow cars, particularly as they drive through residential areas.

Traffic calming involves roadway designs that slow traffic. Some of these strategies cause traffic to shift vertically (as in raised intersections) or horizontally (as in curb extensions) to reduce speed and/or volume. These physical changes include speed humps, speed cushions, chicanes, curb extensions, raised intersections, traffic circles, roundabouts, and so on. Other forms of traffic calming include road narrowing, road striping, dense street tree planning, and visual speed radar. These are visual clues that tend to make drivers slow down. In an urban area traffic must keep moving, but speed is not desirable.

Strategy N21 – Undertake certain, priority, action items from the 2002 Five Points Neighborhood Plan that will allow the area to achieve its vision.

In 2002, a plan was written for the Five Points Neighborhood, which runs on both sides of Route 5 between Holley Street and Mann Street. In the plan, local residents and business leaders describe their vision for the neighborhood as:

It is the vision of the Five Points Neighborhood to be a safe and attractive place to live, work and play. It will be known for its high-quality housing, safe streets and successful neighborhood businesses. The pride of this neighborhood's property owners will be exhibited through well-maintained homes and businesses, interaction among neighbors and consistent communication with community leaders.

The plan included a series of solid recommendations, many of which are echoed elsewhere in this plan. Revitalizing this area involves the recognition that Five Points can become an important neighborhood commercial area. With the arterial cutting

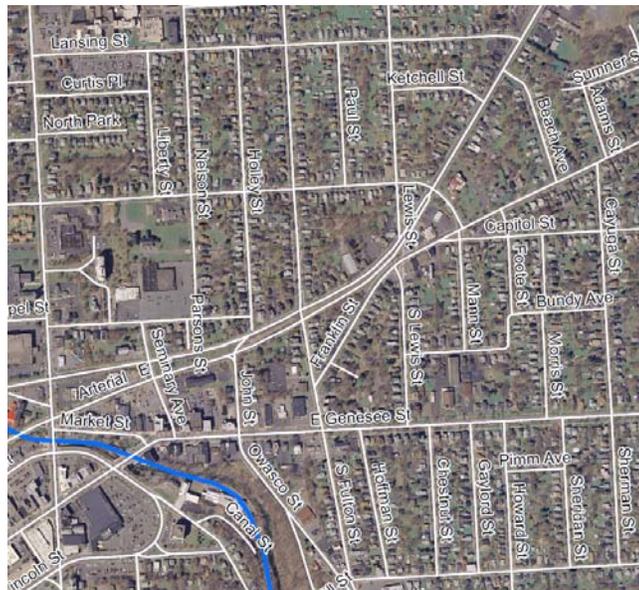


through, automobiles will be a factor for years to come. However, there are a number of changes that can be made to make the area more pedestrian-friendly. Already Auburn has replaced significant portions of deteriorated sidewalks and curbing in the neighborhood using Community Development Block Grant Funds.

This strategy recommends that the city follow through specifically on the following priorities based on the 2002 plan action items.

- > Create neighborhood business design standards
- > Create a standard for curbs and sidewalks that will provide a uniform appearance in the neighborhood as they are replaced or installed.
- > Prioritize curb and sidewalk repair and allocate funds for the rehabilitation of the pedestrian infrastructure. Install those new or replacement sidewalks.
- > Create and promote a neighborhood business façade improvement program.
- > Place trashcans at appropriate intersections to help reduce littering
- > Create a tree maintenance and replacement program to enhance the comfort and visual appeal of neighborhood streets.
- > Identify locations for suitable traffic calming measures and implement those improvements.

The Five Points Neighborhood Plan covers an area that runs along both sides of Route 5 for two blocks and between Holley and Mann Streets.





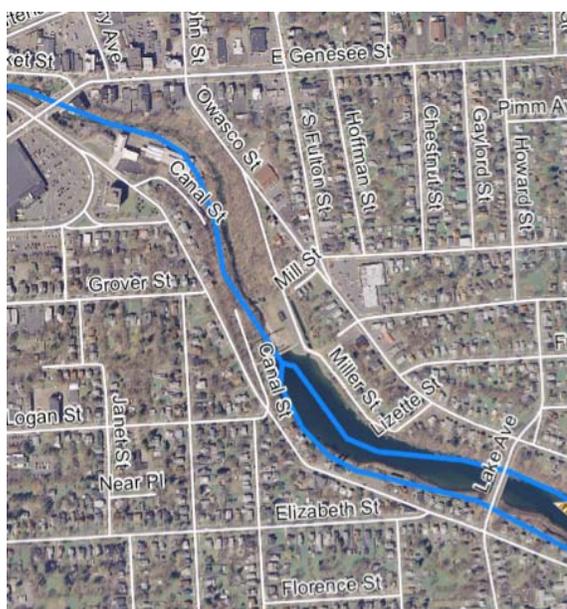
Strategy N22 – Undertake priority, action items from the 2002 Owasco-Osborne Neighborhood Plan to achieve the area’s vision.

In 2002, a plan was written for the Owasco-Osborne Neighborhood, which is dominated by the Owasco River. This, the defining feature of the neighborhood, is also a divider. The study area in the plan also covers a number of large streets and side streets on both banks of the river. It stretches along Owasco Street from East Genesee to Lake Avenue. On Osborne Street, the neighborhood also runs from Lake Avenue past Lincoln Street and joins Loop Road. In the plan, local residents and business leaders describe their vision for the neighborhood as:

It is the vision of the Owasco-Osborne Neighborhood to be a thriving area in Auburn located along the Owasco River that offers a wide range of housing options, retail shops and services. The neighborhood's pride will be exhibited in its well-maintained properties, successful businesses and interactive community members. Owasco-Osborne will continue to serve as a gateway neighborhood to and from the downtown area and beyond – ensuring safe and efficient travel for pedestrians and motorists alike.

Although the city has been proactive replacing sidewalks with federal funding, Auburn should invest in additional recommendations in the study, found below.

- > Improvements to sidewalks and crosswalks; including establishing guidelines to ensure a uniform appearance and consistent pedestrian experience
- > Implement traffic calming measures to reduce speeding
- > Support and promote business building design guidelines
- > Increase pedestrian linkages between the river and downtown
- > Increase public access points along the river. The neighborhood plan is in line with the goals and strategies in this plan's Engaging the Owasco River chapter.



The Owasco-Osbourne Neighborhood study area stretches along Owasco Street from East Genesee to Lake Avenue. On Osborne Street, the neighborhood runs from Lake Avenue past Lincoln Street and joins Loop Road. It includes the side streets.

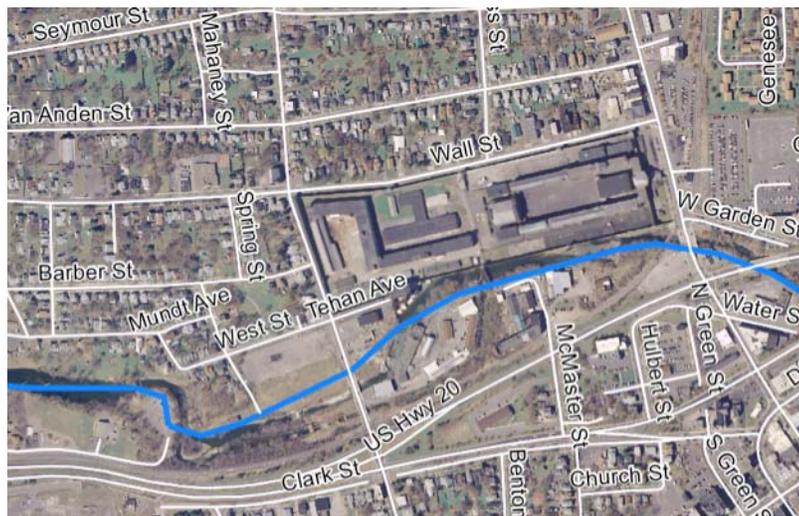


Strategy N23 – Undertake certain, priority, action items from the 2003 Dunn and McCarthy Neighborhood Plan that will allow the area to achieve its vision.

In 2002, the city undertook a neighborhood plan for the Dunn & McCarthy neighborhood, which includes the state correctional facility as well as the former Dunn & McCarthy factory site. Within the neighborhood boundaries are State Street up to Van Anden, Wall Street to Derby and all of Barber. It crosses the river and its southern border is Route 20. The 115-acre study area includes neighborhoods and commercial areas as well. In this report, it is interesting to note that the first problems noted in the neighborhood are the poor conditions of sidewalks and the underutilized riverfront areas. To address the poor conditions of the sidewalks, Auburn has targeted this neighborhood and has used Community Development Block Grant funds to replace extensive sections of sidewalk.

The recommendations of this neighborhood plan that fit well with the comprehensive plan include the following:

- > Developing a sidewalk strategy
- > Clean the Dunn & McCarthy factory site and develop it for recreation
- > Create a plan for, and set the legislative stage for, mixed use development at the Dunn & McCarthy factory site
- > Improve significantly the underutilized Cottage Place Park
- > Develop an Owasco Riverfront Trail



The Dunn & McCarthy Neighborhood runs from State Street to Barber Street and Wall Street to Route 20.



Strategy N24 – Consider rules to allow in-law apartments.

Currently, the Auburn zoning code does not address the issue of 'in-law' apartments. The city planning department reports a number of variance requests for these kinds of living units in existing homes. Although in-law apartment styles vary, most have separate entrances, their own kitchens, private bathrooms, and personal living areas. They can be added on in a variety of ways: above a detached garage, on the second floor of a home, as a first-floor addition, in the basement, or as a guesthouse.

Despite the name, in-law apartments are not just for in-laws. They can be used for other older relatives, caretakers, nannies or older children home after college. While excellent ways to keep extended families together, they also can become small rental units. In a city such as Auburn, that has an oversupply of subdivided single-family homes, care has to be taken to avoid exacerbating that situation.

Some zoning strategies to control in-law apartments include:

- > Limiting the size of the unit
- > Restricting the number of units to one per single family home
- > Not allowing in-law apartments in multi-family structures
- > Integrating in-law accessory units into the main portion of the house
- > Requiring occupation by a family member
- > Prohibiting in-law apartments in zoning districts with too many single-family houses converted to multi-unit dwellings