

Summary

In the year 2018 the Town of Amherst will celebrate its bicentennial anniversary. Over the past two centuries, Amherst has grown from an historical pattern of small settlements surrounded by farmland to a “bedroom” suburb of Buffalo to its present status as a premier residential community and activity/employment center in Western New York, due in large part to the establishment of the University at Buffalo’s North Campus and the Audubon New Community in the 1970s. In recent years Amherst has undergone a fundamental transition from a growing community to one that is mature and largely built out, in which managing change to maintain and enhance the established character and quality of life will be the primary challenge for the future. Developed through a two-year planning process that involved extensive citizen participation, this Comprehensive Plan lays out a positive vision of Amherst’s future and a guide to managing change to achieve the vision as the Town looks forward to its bicentennial anniversary.

In the Vision of Amherst in 2018, the Town is renowned for an **exceptional quality of life** that is based upon three fundamental attributes:

- ***Livability***, encompassing healthy neighborhoods, outstanding public facilities and services, and an active community life.
- ***Community Character***, through the management of growth and change to preserve natural and cultural resources, maintain green space throughout Amherst, and revitalize older neighborhoods and commercial corridors while accommodating quality new development.
- ***Shared Direction***, with Amherst as a partner in the renewed prosperity of the Buffalo-Niagara region, working to balance its roles as a premier residential community and a complementary center of regional activity.

As an expression of citizen expectations and directions for the future, the Vision Statement establishes the mandate for the policies and action programs contained in the Comprehensive Plan. These policies and action programs, in turn, are designed to produce incremental progress towards achieving the Vision over the two-decade time horizon of the Plan. Four Key Initiatives, or major changes of direction from current policies, are proposed to provide a focus for action as the Town works to move towards a position of excellence as articulated in the Vision Statement. These Key Initiatives are:

- ***Aesthetic/Community Character:*** To be renowned for the beauty, character, and environmental quality of Amherst.
- ***Education:*** Capitalizing on the presence of the University at Buffalo, other institutions of higher learning, and outstanding public school districts, to become known as one of the nation’s leading “knowledge-based” communities.
- ***Revitalization:*** To become a model for effective reinvestment and revitalization of older neighborhoods.
- ***Governance:*** To exercise leadership by providing excellent services and facilities, ensuring fiscal balance, and managing development to promote predictability, fairness, and quality.

The Vision Statement and Key Initiatives establish the conceptual framework of the Comprehensive Plan. The remainder of the Plan details specific policies, strategies, and actions in support of this framework:

- The ***Plan Elements*** provide goals, objectives, and policies for the following subject areas:
 - Land Use and Development
 - Natural and Cultural Resources
 - Economic Development
 - Transportation
 - Infrastructure
 - Housing and Neighborhoods
 - Community Facilities

While presented in separate elements, the policies are interrelated and are designed to be mutually supportive in guiding the Town towards achieving the Vision Statement through the Key Initiatives.

- The ***Focal Area Planning Strategies*** describe the application of the town-wide policies contained in the Plan Elements to six smaller geographic areas within the Town with special planning challenges.
- The ***Implementation*** chapter establishes a strategy for implementing the Comprehensive Plan, including 12 “action programs” and a system for monitoring plan progress.

Land Use and Development

The Land Use and Development Element is designed to guide new development, redevelopment, and preservation activities within the Town to achieve:

- Revitalized older neighborhoods and commercial corridors
- Quality new development

- A network of parks, open spaces, and greenways throughout the community

Policies for *development patterns* are intended to promote more compact, pedestrian-friendly development forms focused on mixed-use activity centers. *Development character* policies emphasize the application of context-sensitive design standards to enhance community appearance and sense of place. To spur *reinvestment* rather than new greenfield development, the Plan proposes tax and other incentives and zoning revisions focused on infill and redevelopment in older neighborhoods and commercial corridors. *Public investment* in visual improvements and community amenities is identified as a way to enhance aesthetic character and support desired private investment. A town-wide *open space system* linked by trails, greenways, stream corridors, and bicycle/pedestrian facilities along scenic roadways is proposed as a major priority of the Plan. Finally, policies for the *development review and approval process* are designed to achieve a greater level of predictability and certainty of outcome for both citizens and developers.

Natural and Cultural Resources

This element addresses preservation and enhancement of Amherst's rich natural and cultural resources for the future. Policies for *open space* reinforce the directive of the Land Use and Development Element to establish a town-wide system of open space and greenways that incorporates sensitive natural and cultural resources. Improved regulations, policies, and management strategies are presented to protect *sensitive environmental resources*, including water resources and wetlands, trees and woodlands, and historic properties. An important new initiative is a community-wide "*Greening Amherst*" program of tree planting and re-vegetation.

Economic Development

This element sets forth policies to promote sustainable, quality economic development and redevelopment that respects the character and quality of life of Amherst's residential communities. These policies address the following issues:

- Promoting a healthy *tax and employment base*
- Increasing economic development *partnerships* with governmental agencies and private businesses and institutions, particularly the *University at Buffalo*
- Preventing adverse commercial development impacts on *community character and quality of life*
- Working to promote *regional economic development*

Greater cooperation with the University at Buffalo (UB) is an important focus of the Economic Development Element. Towards this end, it is proposed that the Town and University establish a

formal, collaborative planning structure to address issues such as opportunities for business/employment growth related to University research functions, land use planning for the “town/gown” edge, and increased social and cultural ties.

Transportation

The Transportation Element is intended to encourage a more balanced, multi-modal transportation system that emphasizes alternative means of travel, including walking, biking, and public transportation. Specific policies address the following:

- Targeted capital and operational improvements to the **road network** to increase mobility and address severe congestion problems
- Investments in creating a town-wide **bicycle/pedestrian network** comprised of on-street and off-street facilities
- Improved **transit service** linked to mixed-use activity centers proposed in the Land Use and Development Element

Although the Transportation Element proposes that the Town develop a long-term capital improvement program to address the most serious congestion problems on local roads, it also recognizes that a certain level of congestion is inevitable. Thus the transportation policies balance functional efficiency for the automobile with other community objectives, such protecting neighborhoods from the adverse impacts of insensitive roadway improvement projects. The Element designates functional classifications (i.e., the types of service town roads are intended to provide for vehicular circulation) while identifying certain roadway corridors for the application of context-sensitive design standards to maintain their character. A key principle is to coordinate transportation and land use policies to promote compact, mixed-use development patterns that reduce automobile dependency and encourage pedestrian activity.

Infrastructure

The goal of the Infrastructure Element is to ensure that Amherst is provided with well-maintained and cost-effective public water, sewer, stormwater, and other utility infrastructure systems that support other Comprehensive Plan elements. The infrastructure policies focus on issues related to stormwater management and sanitary sewer:

- The policies for **stormwater management** call for the Town to develop a comprehensive program integrating measures to address flooding problems with standards and techniques to reduce water quality impacts from existing and new development.

- The *sanitary sewer* policies emphasize maintaining and upgrading infrastructure that serve existing development rather than extending new lines to currently undeveloped areas.

A new boundary for Sewer District No. 16 in the northern part of Town is proposed to exclude areas designated for rural and open space uses and to include areas designated for more intensive development by the Land Use and Development Element.

Housing and Neighborhoods

The goal of the Housing and Neighborhoods Element is to ensure that quality affordable housing and healthy and diverse neighborhoods are available to all Amherst residents. *Affordable housing* policies focus on continuing existing housing programs that promote homeownership and affordability. Policies for *housing diversity* are designed to encourage a variety of housing types, including higher density residential uses in locations such as mixed-use activity centers. The *neighborhood conservation* policies propose initiation of a program to promote revitalization of older neighborhoods through measures such as code enforcement, capital improvements, and design standards. This program would be accomplished through Neighborhood Improvement Plans developed in a collaborative planning process with neighborhood residents and businesses.

Community Facilities and Services

This element seeks to maintain the excellence and contributions of Amherst's community facilities and services to quality of life in a fiscally responsible manner. Specific policies address:

- Establishing an on-going system to objectively identify *community facility and service needs* for use in planning and programming by town providers
- Identifying opportunities to locate community facilities to achieve Comprehensive Plan objectives, for example strengthening neighborhoods or *reinforcing mixed-use activity centers*
- Pursuing a variety of strategies to ensure that *community facility and service costs* are reconciled with the fiscal capability of the Town

One of the key policies calls for using the capital improvement programming process to set realistic priorities for funding projects over a long-term timeframe, based upon needs as determined by the proposed community facility planning system and the Town's projected fiscal capacity.

Focal Planning Areas

The Focal Planning Areas chapter sets forth overall urban design concepts and accompanying strategies to provide direction for the future of the following six areas:

1. Northwest Amherst
2. North Amherst
3. University
4. Eggertsville
5. Snyder
6. Williamsville

The concept plan and strategies for **Northwest Amherst** address quality of life for residential neighborhoods, in particular enhanced access to parks, recreational facilities, and pedestrian networks. The focus for **North Amherst** is on preservation of rural character. The concept plan and strategies for the **University** focal planning area emphasize physical and programmatic connections among uses and activity centers, supporting the “Education” or “Knowledge-Based” Key Initiative. The **Eggertsville** plan and strategies highlight the physical distinctiveness and social diversity of the community as strengths to build on for the future. For **Snyder**, the concept plan and strategies focus on the long-term viability of the established commercial centers. The **Williamsville** concept plan and strategies seek to strengthen Main Street as a destination for persons attracted by its special character and sense of place.

Implementation

The Implementation section of the Comprehensive Plan proposes 12 action programs as high priorities for implementation within or beginning in the next several years. These are intended as areas for the Town to focus its resources in implementing the Comprehensive Plan, either through initiation of a new program or an increase in the level of commitment to an existing one. Following Town Board formal acceptance of the Comprehensive Plan, the Town should undertake these programs:

1. Comprehensively revise the Town’s *development regulations, standards, and review/approval processes* to implement the policies of the Land Use and Development Element.
2. Provide expanded incentives for *reinvestment/ revitalization*. Eggertsville and Snyder are designated as priority locations for application of such incentives.
3. Implement a coordinated strategy to achieve a *town-wide open space and greenway network*, including a public acquisition program.
4. Initiate a community-wide tree planting and re-vegetation program (*Greening Amherst*).
5. Establish a *collaborative planning structure* with the *University at Buffalo*.
6. Pursue *partnerships* with educational institutions, private businesses, and others to *promote economic development*.

7. Develop a strategy to identify and ***implement targeted improvements to roadways*** with identified level of service deficiencies, consistent with the “context-sensitive” design policies.
8. Develop a strategy to implement a comprehensive ***bicycle and pedestrian network***.
9. Implement a comprehensive ***stormwater management strategy*** to address flooding and water quality protection.
10. ***Limit future sewer service extensions*** to support the Future Land Use Map. Revise the boundaries of Sewer Service District 16 and establish a ***septic system maintenance district*** for areas not designated for public sewer.
11. Initiate a ***Neighborhood Conservation Program***, including a collaborative process to develop Neighborhood Improvement Plans. Southeast Amherst is designated as the highest priority for development of such a plan.
12. Establish an objective system of ***planning for community facility and service needs***. Link this system to a ***long-range capital programming process*** to reconcile needs with the Town’s fiscal capacity.

The Comprehensive Plan is intended as a working document to be used as a policy guide for day-to-day decision-making and as a “to do” list as the Town sets priorities for effective action over the short and long terms to realize the Vision. To help ensure successful implementation, a plan monitoring process should be established, consisting of periodic (annual) reviews to 1) assess progress and 2) make adjustments to the action programs based upon the progress made to date, new priorities, and changes in the internal and external environments of the Town.