

City of North Tonawanda LWRP Monitoring Report June 2011

Community Background:

The City of North Tonawanda is located in western New York State, midway between the Cities of Buffalo and Niagara Falls, at the confluence of the Niagara River and New York State Barge Canal (Erie Canal). The city is within a two hour drive from several large population centers and three major international border crossings to Canada. North Tonawanda is a small city, approximately 15mi², and is currently home to roughly 31,000 residents. The central business district, located adjacent to the Erie Canal, is fairly active and includes several important historic and cultural resources such as the Riviera Theatre and Allan Herschell Carrousel Museum.

Historically, North Tonawanda was an important regional hub for manufacturing and industry with an excellent railway system to transport products and a major shipping center. Because of its prime location at the western terminus of the Erie Canal, the city played a central role in the shipment of lumber from Michigan and Canada to east coast markets and thus became known as the "Lumber City". However, with the completion of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959, commercial usage of the canal virtually ceased. Soon after, the local economy was further weakened by the decline of manufacturing and chemical industries, leaving the city with aging industrial and railway infrastructure, deteriorating housing and environmental contamination.



The city's primary strength is its waterfront location. With over nine (9) miles of waterfront on the three waterbodies – the Niagara River, Little River, and the Erie Canal, the city recognized revitalizing its shoreline was essential to its future vitality and economic stability.

North Tonawanda adopted its Local Waterfront Revitalization Program (LWRP) in 1988. At that time, the city had recently lost several major industrial operations along the waterfront. With the decline of manufacturing, the LWRP identified water-related recreational activities such as boating and fishing becoming increasingly important elements in the city's initiative to stimulate economic growth. The LWRP also promoted use of the downtown's waterfront location - at the confluence of the Niagara River and Erie Canal - as a catalyst to downtown investment and retail activity. To advance the community vision, the LWRP set forth a list of projects aimed at increasing public access to the waterfront as well as zoning changes necessary to allow for mixture of water-dependent and water-enhanced uses along the shoreline as abandoned industrial lands would be redeveloped.

LWRP Monitoring Process:

The goal of the monitoring process is for the Department of State (DOS) to assess a community's consistency with its LWRP, and to understand local implementation activities and decision-making procedures related to the LWRP. Additionally, this process provides a forum for a community to highlight successes and request technical and financial assistance for program implementation.

DOS began the City of North Tonawanda's LWRP monitoring with a phone call to the Mayor, asking the city to participate and briefly describing the monitoring protocol. A follow-up correspondence was sent to provide information relating to what the monitoring process would involve, and a list of survey questions was attached. The correspondence indicated that a conference call would take place between DOS representatives and key municipal officials to answer the survey questions; a follow-up site visit/meeting would be arranged to review the responses provided in the survey; and, following the site visit, DOS would prepare a written assessment of findings to identify areas of improvement, training, or need for LWRP amendments.

The conference call to discuss the city's answers to the survey questions was informative and provided the details necessary for the DOS to make its assessment. Participants from the city were Mayor Robert G. Ortt and Jim Sullivan, Director of Community Development.

As a follow-up to the call, DOS staff traveled to North Tonawanda to meet with city representatives - including Mayor Ortt and the Director of Community Development. This meeting focused on the city's LWRP update and identification of future opportunities to implement the LWRP in partnership with DOS. The city intends to move forward with redevelopment of the Gratwick Park marina and Tonawanda Island as its two highest priorities. Revisions to the local consistency law were also reviewed. The meeting concluded with a tour of the waterfront area, including Tonawanda Island and Tonawanda Gateway Harbor.

Collaborations with Department of State:

Since the completion of the North Tonawanda LWRP in 1988, the city has worked to advance its implementation in partnership with DOS. Five Environmental Protection Fund Local Waterfront Revitalization Program (EPF LWRP) grants have been awarded to the City of North Tonawanda (See attached chart: Grants Awarded - Title 11 Environmental Protection Fund Local Waterfront Revitalization Program, City of North Tonawanda).

Through these EPF LWRP awards, several waterfront planning and construction projects have been completed including design of the Gateway Harbor, construction of a 2,325 foot multi-use trail along the Canal waterfront, design of a three mile trailway along the Niagara River, and update of the city's LWRP. The EPF LWRP grant program has been instrumental in improving recreational amenities for North Tonawanda residents and tourists, and has made a positive impact on the downtown economy by expanding public access to the waterfront.



Multi-use trail along the Erie Canal

DOS Findings:

Overview

When the City of North Tonawanda LWRP was adopted in 1988, following the closure of several large industrial operations, it was a great step forward in planning for future development underutilized and abandoned properties as well as public access improvements needed to stimulate waterfront revitalization and economic development. The LWRP focused on capitalizing on the tourism and recreational potential of the Niagara River and Erie Canal waterfront areas. The LWRP led to the completion of many significant projects including construction of the Western Gateway Harbor by the NYS Canal Corporation. As a result, the city is now firmly established as one of seven major canal harbor centers.

However, as the city's LWRP is now over twenty years old, it has become out-of-date and inconsistent with current planning efforts such as the city's 2008 Comprehensive Plan and the 2006 Downtown Redevelopment Plan. With DOS technical assistance and EPF LWRP funding, the city is currently preparing an LWRP update. It is anticipated the LWRP update will serve as the unifying vision for waterfront revitalization and play a more prominent role in community development. The LWRP update will identify the next generation of waterfront revitalization projects to help the city realize its new vision.

The city requested DOS assistance with advancing the redevelopment of the city-owned marina property, adjacent to Gratwick Park. A feasibility study was completed and the city would like to move forward with the implementation of recommendations. To continue, technical and monetary assistance for capital improvements will be needed. Implementation of the Gratwick Park Master Plan is underway and also remains a high priority project for the city in an effort to create the regional destination envisioned for the site. The city has received two grant awards from the Niagara River Greenway Commission to construct amenities including fishing access at the park and basic safety improvements at the marina.

One of the most significant opportunities for redevelopment within the City of North Tonawanda is Tonawanda Island – an 89 acre island with nearly two miles of shoreline along the Niagara River and Little River. Redevelopment obstacles include aging infrastructure, obsolete and abandoned buildings, and environmental contamination. With assistance from the LWRP and Brownfield Opportunity Area (BOA) programs, the city has developed a proposed land use plan for the island which envisions a mixture of commercial and residential development with provisions of a public access easement along the Niagara River shoreline. The Little River waterfront is largely an established working marine environment, including marinas, boat repair, and marine infrastructure businesses. The city intends to seek funding through the EPF LWRP to redevelop the former fire training facility to allow for public access on the Little River and serve as a gateway to the island.

LWRP Implementation

In order to implement the 1988 LWRP, the city created a new Waterfront Zoning District along the Niagara River shoreline including all of Tonawanda Island. The former industrial zoning in this area permitted virtually all land uses with minimal control of design, landscaping, and site plan review. In order to remedy this problem and ensure that shoreline development was consistent with the LWRP, the new Waterfront District was enacted. This new district provides flexibility in allowing various types of land uses which are either dependent on or enhanced by a waterfront location, while excluding certain activities such as junk yards, truck terminals, and dumps. While the Waterfront District favors water-dependent uses, water enhanced uses are allowed by special permit provided that development includes a

public pedestrian walkway along the entire frontage on the Niagara River, and buildings and structures are placed on the site in a manner that maximizes the amount of open space along the shoreline. A site plan is also required for any new use or major expansion to an existing use.

Gateway Harbor

The city's LWRP identified the need to increase recreational and tourism opportunities along the Erie Canal, to support the local economy by attracting visitors to the downtown. In 1995, North Tonawanda received its first EPF LWRP grant award and began to address this need by preparing design plans for a public park and boating facility along the Erie Canal. The design included a pedestrian plaza, pavilion for special civic events, transient docking, a shoreline esplanade, landscaping and related amenities.

With these designs in-hand, the city was able to enter into an agreement with the NYS Canal Corporation to build the Tonawanda Gateway Harbor with a combination of federal, State, local, and private funding as well as local in-kind resources. Today, the Gateway Harbor is a major attraction along the Erie Canal catering to boaters and tourists who travel the Niagara River and Erie Canal. The Gateway Harbor provides a perfect backdrop for civic events and festivals including the immensely popular annual Canal Fest – an 8-day festival shared by the twin cities of Tonawanda and North Tonawanda, drawing local citizens and visitors with an annual estimated attendance of over 200,000 people. The construction of the Gateway Harbor has also resulted in noticeable economic benefits with the openings of new restaurants and a tour boat operation soon after the harbor's completion. In 2004, the city was awarded an additional EPF LWRP grant to bury overhead electrical wires and install period lighting along highly visible portion of the roadway fronting the canal.



North Tonawanda Gateway Harbor

Multi-Use Trail Network

In efforts to improve connections between the waterfront, residential neighborhoods, and the downtown, the city received two EPF LWRP awards to design and construct segments of a multi-use trail. The Canal Trail extends east from the Gateway Harbor, winding along the canal waterfront. The Niagara River Trail follows the west side of River Road and connects two waterfront parks along the Niagara River – Gratwick Park and Veteran's Park – with the downtown. Future improvements to the Niagara River Trail, including landscaping/buffering from River Road and way-finding signage, could improve its utilization. Further expansion of the Canal Trail to connect with the Botanical Gardens and adjacent communities should be explored.

LWRP Update

During the city's Master Plan update in 2008, it became apparent the LWRP also needed to be updated to reflect existing conditions, clarify the community vision, and identify new waterfront revitalization projects. The city's LWRP had become outdated and as a result, was no longer effective or well used.

The update to the LWRP is currently underway with funding from the EPF LWRP, and it is anticipated the LWRP amendment will be adopted by the end of 2011. The LWRP amendment will be essential in ensuring public access and appropriate development as the city focuses on redeveloping Tonawanda Island.

LWRP Document Accessibility

Paper copies of the document are currently located in the Community Development Office and in the City Clerk's office. The LWRP is also available on the DOS website: <http://www.dos.ny.gov/opd/>
In order to improve accessibility, the city intends to post a copy of the LWRP on its website when the update in progress is completed.

Local Consistency Review

The City of North Tonawanda Local Waterfront Revitalization Program Local Consistency Law (Chapter 37 Article 2) was adopted on February 16, 1988 to provide for the protection and beneficial use of the natural and man-made resources within the waterfront area of the City of North Tonawanda by ensuring that certain actions to be undertaken, approved, or funded by city agencies will be undertaken in a manner consistent with the policies and purposes of the City of North Tonawanda LWRP. The law defines "Actions" as either Type I or Unlisted actions as defined in SEQR regulations, 6NYCRR part 617.

The city's existing local consistency process requires that actions and all pertinent information be referred to the Common Council for review and determination regarding the action's consistency with the LWRP policies and purposes. The Common Council must complete its consistency review within thirty (30) days of a complete referral. Prior to making a consistency determination, the Common Council may refer such matters to any municipal agency for review and an advisory opinion. No action within the waterfront revitalization area shall be undertaken, approved, or funded by any city agency unless the Common Council certifies its consistency with the policies and purposes of the LWRP.

The City Planning Board and Community Development staff are aware of the LWRP and the consistency review requirements associated with it. There have not been any local consistency reviews completed in the past two years. This is attributed to the weak economy and lack of new waterfront development projects.

During the monitoring process it became apparent that the city felt its consistency review process was not working effectively. After discussions with DOS, the city decided to revise its consistency law to give the Planning Board the responsibility of preparing consistency recommendations for proposed actions within the waterfront revitalization area. The city also expressed interest in having DOS provide formal consistency review training to the Planning Board and other appropriate staff members. This will be scheduled in the future, to coincide with the adoption of the LWRP amendment and revised local consistency law currently in progress.

Grants Awarded			
Title 11 Environmental Protection Fund Local Waterfront Revitalization Program (EPF LWRP)			
City of North Tonawanda			
Year	Amount of Grant	Project Description	Status
2007	\$47,750	North Tonawanda LWRP - The City of North Tonawanda will update the 1988 Local Waterfront Revitalization Program for its nine miles of Niagara River and Erie Canal waterfronts. This update will allow the City to accurately reflect its current demographics, land use, community vision, and list of priority projects and actions, and will be integrated with an ongoing update of the City's Comprehensive Plan.	Underway
2004	\$70,000	Construction of Sweeney and Oliver Street Amenities - The City will install period lighting and interpretive signage along Sweeney Street, located adjacent to the central business district and the western terminus of the Erie Canal. In addition, the City will develop signage for the Oliver Street Railroad Bridge.	Closed
2002	\$20,000	Niagara River Trailway Plan - The City will design a three mile trailway along the Niagara River that will link Tonawanda's Gateway Harbor on the canal and the downtown shopping districts with North Tonawanda's Niagara River parks at Fisherman's Park and Gratwick-Riverside Park. The project will build on work completed under previous EPF awards.	Closed
1996	\$35,000	Canal Trail - The project entails construction of a pedestrian trail along the Barge Canal shoreline, extending to the east of the Packet Centre. The trail will be constructed on state-owned Canal System right-of-way and will include: 900 linear of sidewalk extending east from the Packet Centre; a 1,400 ft. long trail extending from the sidewalk east along the Barge Canal shoreline paralleling Sweeney Street; and protective railing.	Closed
1995	\$15,000	Gateway Canal Park Preconstruction Plans - The project involves the design of a public park and boating facility along the Barge Canal adjacent to the Packet Centre. The proposed facility is intended to serve as the western gateway to the State Canal System and will support implementation of the State Canal Recreationway Plan. The facility, to be known as Pinochle Park, will include a pedestrian plaza, a scenic overlook area, parking facilities, landscaping, a shoreline promenade, and docks to accommodate transient boaters.	Closed