

A Planning Board for Erie County

Introduction

The Partnership for the Public Good (PPG) unites 212 organizations working to build a better western New York. Each year, the partners vote on their top policy priorities for the coming year; these priorities become the PPG Community Agenda. The very first Community Agenda, formed in 2008, included a provision calling for a planning board in Erie County. Since that time, the reasons for a planning board have only become more compelling.

There is a reason that every other large county in New York has a planning board, and that the municipalities within Erie County themselves rely on planning boards. A planning board is a proven tool that can help the County:

- Gain expertise from a diverse array of experts and stakeholders;
- Make the planning process more democratic and accessible;
- Provide more certainty and clarity to businesses and developers;
- Support strategic, efficient development patterns that make the best use of existing resources while expanding economic opportunity;
- Align resources around completed strategic plans such as the Framework for Regional Growth, One Region Forward, the Farmland Protection Plan, and the blueprint of the WNY Regional Economic Development Council;
- Better compete for state and federal funding streams.

The region's planning in recent decades has not served it well; rather, it has encouraged sprawl without growth, the loss of farms, an increase in vacant buildings, unnecessary costs on taxpayers, and unnecessary damage to public and environmental health. A planning board alone will not solve all these problems, but it is an important part of the solution. Currently, many of the functions of a planning board in Erie County are fulfilled by the deputy Planning Commissioner. In contrast to having a single person fill that role, a planning board brings in a diverse array of County residents with expertise in different fields to hold public discussions and dialogues and reach the best conclusions. The rest of this brief identifies some of the key challenges that a planning board can help to address.

Sprawl Without Growth

Many experts have aptly summarized western New York's development pattern as "sprawl without growth." Between 1950 and 2000, the region gained only 80,881 people, but the urbanized area nearly tripled, going from 123 square miles to 367 square miles. Even as the region's population started to fall, the rapid sprawl continued. From 1980 until 2006, when the region's population was declining by 5.8%, the urbanized area grew 38%.¹

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Losing Farms

The number of farms in the region dropped by over 20% from 1987 to 1997, and 42,069 acres of farmland were converted to other uses.² Agricultural land is good for County finances: it generates more tax revenue than it costs in county services.³ Thus, losing farmland makes it harder for the County to balance its budget. Small, locally owned farms also offer a host of social, cultural and environmental benefits.

Abandoning Buildings, Neighborhoods, and Existing Infrastructure

What makes Buffalo's sprawl different from sprawl in most metropolitan areas is that our region is losing population, not gaining it. This means – roughly speaking – that for every new building we create we are abandoning and demolishing one older building, typically located in the parts of the region that most need new investment. The percentage of vacant housing units measured by the Census has exploded, giving Buffalo one of the highest rates in the nation.

Vacancy Rate in the City of Buffalo

1970	4.4%
1980	9.9%
1990	10.2%
2000	15.7%
2010	15.7%

The social and governmental costs of this abandonment and blight are enormous. Demolitions cost more than \$14,000 per home.⁴ Abandoned buildings drive down property values and hence property tax receipts for the City and County. Vacancy and blight fuel disinvestment by property owners and businesses because few people want to invest in property that is declining in value.

Driving More

One key result of our development pattern is much more driving. Between 1984 and 1999, the average number of miles driven each day increased by 50%, from 10 to 15 miles.⁵ As of 2000, 41% of the households in the metro area were living at least 10 miles from the central business district.⁶ School travel expenses in Erie and Niagara Counties increased 60%, while the number of students increased less than 7%.⁷

Between 1970 and 2000, even as the population was falling, the total miles of roads in Erie and Niagara counties rose 5,410 miles. All those road miles are expensive. As of 2006, it cost roughly \$4 million per mile to build a single lane roadway, and \$4,800 per mile a year to maintain a highway.⁸ Erie County estimated the cost of its highway and bridge projects for 2006-2010 at \$685 million.⁹

As the Regional Framework explains, vehicular travel hurts the environment in many ways: “Pollution from motor vehicles contributes to declines in air quality, paved surfaces increase urban runoff and threaten water quality, and transportation infrastructure can fragment agricultural and forested lands and wildlife habitat.”¹⁰ Of course, driving is also dangerous: over 41,000 Americans die in car crashes each year.¹¹ And the air pollution caused by vehicles is even more deadly. According to a study from MIT, emissions from road pollution cause 53,000 premature deaths in the United States each year.¹²

Global warming has rendered these costs particularly unsustainable. Transportation accounts for 39 percent of carbon emissions in western New York.¹³ The U.S. Department of Energy predicts that driving will increase 59% between 2005 and 2030, despite a population increase of only 23%. Even with the predicted fuel efficiency improvements of 12% over that period, carbon emissions will increase by 41%.¹⁴ In other words, more efficient cars cannot save us if we keep driving more. Smart growth could reduce transportation emissions by 7% to 10% by 2050.¹⁵

Fiscal, Social, Environmental Costs

Of course, sprawl imposes many other costs as well: for example, extending water and sewer lines out into the countryside. Erie County’s annual sewer budget for its roughly 800 miles of line is approximately \$37.5 million, or \$46,250 per mile or \$8.76 per foot. Amherst estimates that extending sewer lines costs between \$40 and \$90 per foot.¹⁶

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The Regional Framework estimates that development at densities of one household per acre or less costs the public \$18,000 per household, while development at 6 households per acre and higher costs only \$6,000 per household. Thus according to the Framework, if smart growth principles were followed from 2006 to 2025, the public would save \$800 million.¹⁷ This is consistent with national studies showing that reducing sprawl can cut infrastructure costs by nearly half.¹⁸

Sprawl encourages a variety of wasteful practices: larger lots, larger homes, large impervious surfaces at parking lots and malls. It encourages national chain stores, fast food franchises, and big box retailers that drain money out of the local economy instead of re-circulating it as local owners do. Most importantly, perhaps, sprawl damages the community by encouraging the abandonment and demolition of our urban core, with all the environmental and social consequences that entails.

Conclusion

Erie County's development pattern over the last decades has not been fiscally, socially, or environmentally sustainable. It has cost county residents in tax bills and transportation expenses, and it has damaged their health and well-being. A County planning board will help guide us toward more efficient development patterns while also adding democracy, clarity, and predictability to our land use decision-making.

¹ Final Report, Erie-Niagara Framework for Regional Growth (October 2006), p. 15

² Id., p. 28.

³ Id., p. 29.

⁴ www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/files/1_2_1/Mayor/CitiStat/EDPIS/11-3-06/Demos.pdf

⁵ Erie-Niagara Framework for Regional Growth, p. 26

⁶ www.diversitydata.com, Harvard School of Public Health

⁷ "At Taxpayers' Expense: How Government Policies Encourage Sprawl in Erie and Niagara Counties," p. 8, League of Women Voters (2006 Revised Edition).

⁸ "At Taxpayers' Expense," p. 2.

⁹ Id., p. 8.

¹⁰ Final Report, p. 26.

¹¹ "At Taxpayers' Expense," p. 12.

¹² Chu, Jennifer (2013). "Study: Air pollution causes 200,000 early deaths each year in the U.S." MIT News Office.

¹³ One Region Forward Final Plan (2015), p.101.

¹⁴ Final Report, p. 3.

¹⁵ Id., p. 9.

¹⁶ "At Taxpayers' Expense," p. 9.

¹⁷ Final Report, p. 46,

¹⁸ Timothy Beatley, *Native to Nowhere: Sustaining Home and Community in a Global Age*, Island Press (2004), p. 14.

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