PLANNING RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE
CENTRAL AREAS OF THE CITY OF RENSSELAER

PLANNING STUDIO
SUMMER 1999

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report offers recommendations to the community of Rensselaer on future land use in the Central Areas of the City. These recommendations are designed to capitalize on the City's existing strengths, which include: the underutilized shoreline along the Hudson River, the new Train Station project, the expansion of the Capital View Office Park, the historic Fort Crailo neighborhood, and the City's low-rise, human scale urban environment. It is believed that comprehensive revitalization efforts in the Central Areas will result in an overall rejuvenation of the City.

The Studio team divided the study section of Rensselaer into three areas: Waterfront, Train Station and Downtown. For each study area, the existing conditions were analyzed, and opportunities and constraints were identified. A brief summary of ideas that benefit each study area is provided here.

All Central Areas:
There were reoccurring themes of improvement that evolved from our analysis. These proposals are applicable to any portion of the study area. They include:

- Enhancing streetscapes to promote bicycle and pedestrian activity and to improve the aesthetic quality of the gateways to the Central Areas.
- Encouraging homeownership to instill a vested interest in the community.
- Drafting urban design guidelines.
- Improving facades.
- Infilling vacant lots.

The Fort Crailo neighborhood is a distinctive portion of the City. It should be protected and preserved as its buildings provide visual clues about Rensselaer's past. Proposals for historic preservation include:

- Development of a historic overlay zone in the zoning ordinance.
- Inventorying the buildings to determine whether placement on the National Register of Historic Places is warranted.
- Creating a revolving loan pool to assist homeowners with renovations.

Waterfront:
This study area extends from the City Boat Launch south to Fort Crailo. A primary goal for the waterfront is to increase and encourage river access for the public. In order to meet this goal, the Studio team proposes several ideas:

- Installing a Riverwalk trail.
- Conducting a feasibility study on the Boat Launch to determine cost of upgrades and improvements.
- Promoting environmentally friendly mixed-use waterfront development.
- Creating a waterfront master plan.
- Creating a public park on Riverside Avenue.
- Expanding the boat slips at the Albany Yacht Club.
• Possible redevelopment of the Petro-Chem Pipe Manufacturing site.

**Train Station:**
The primary goal for this section, which encompasses the area bounded by Broadway, Partition Street, East Street and Third Avenue, is to capitalize on the renovation project for the Amtrak Station. East Street can become a center of both commuter and residential activity by encouraging additional commercial development. Proposals for the train station study area are:

• Relocating City Hall, the Police Station and the Library to create a civic plaza adjacent to the train station.
• Establishing a more balanced land use scheme that incorporates retail, office and residential uses.

**Downtown:**
Downtown Rensselaer should be a vibrant and thriving area within the City. This can be accomplished by creating a viable business district and building a substantial population. Objectives for the downtown are:

• Incorporating more mixed-use development.
• Promoting commercial development along Columbia Turnpike.
• Reconstruction of Columbia Turnpike by NYS Department of Transportation as a four-lane urban boulevard with a planted median.

This report concludes with recommendations for a continuing planning process. It is imperative that Rensselaer defines its future now and takes the necessary steps to implement that vision. The Studio team recommends that the City of Rensselaer initiates a comprehensive planning process in order to produce a comprehensive plan, re-examines the outdated zoning ordinance, and implements a Geographic Information Systems database.
INTRODUCTION

Upon review of current and emerging issues for the City of Rensselaer, the City Planning Office and the State University at Albany determined that a cooperative project focusing on the Central Areas (Map 2) would best benefit the City. The areas, which include the waterfront extending from the City Boat Launch south to Fort Crailo, Upper Broadway, the Amtrak station and adjacent blocks, and the Downtown. The Central Areas of Rensselaer plays a crucial role in determining the economic vitality and character of the city. For the purposes of this report they are divided into three study areas: Waterfront, Train Station, and Downtown.

The City of Rensselaer is a unique place that potentially offers the conveniences of a larger city bundled in an atmosphere of small town charm and character. Its low rise, medium density urban characteristics and its geographic location along the underutilized banks of the historic Hudson River make it an ideal candidate for a program of improvements. This report offers the City several recommendations for taking the first step towards revitalization efforts that will benefit the City as a whole. Rensselaer should look to capitalize on several of its underutilized assets. These include a history that dates back to the 1600's, its virgin shoreline, the strong sense of civic pride, the home of one of the nation's busiest Amtrak stations and an office complex that currently supports 450 state workers.

With a current trend of declining population that is projected to continue, the City faces many difficulties. In a period of national economic stability, Rensselaer struggles to maintain its tax base with the loss of facilities such as the BASF Corporation in December of 2000. It is necessary that the City take steps to redefine its role in the regional economy of the Capital District. Two such projects within the study area, currently in progress, can act as the foundation for economic revitalization. The Amtrak Station redevelopment project and the addition of a fourth building in the Capital View Office Park offers many potential benefits if a strategy to capitalize on both can negotiated. This report discusses ideas to assist in the City in capturing some spin-off benefits from these two developments.

Finally, it should be noted that the Patriots Landing project, which has received site plan approval and continues to be debated, is an additional project that affects the study area of this report. However, because the project is in the northernmost part of the waterfront area under study, and because it was under official review during the course of the Studio, the Studio did not examine it comprehensively. It would therefore be inappropriate to offer an opinion or recommendations pertaining to Patriots Landing.
City of Rensselaer
Central Area

Map 2:
Study Areas
**Project Goals and Objectives**

The primary objectives of this report are to build a sustainable and livable downtown, to enable the City to capitalize on the new rail station, and to foster environmentally friendly economic activity along the waterfront. Although these initiatives are aimed specifically at the Central Areas of Rensselaer, this report sees the revitalization of these areas as the first building blocks in a series of long-term planning efforts by the City. This report offers a set of recommendations for modest, incremental and positive changes to the City enhancing its current economic environment.

The initiatives are defined by the guiding principles outlined below and are designed to create a meaningful city center. The initiatives that lay the groundwork for the specific proposals in the *Waterfront, Train Station* and *Downtown* target areas are as follows:

**Fostering an economically sustainable downtown and waterfront.**
- Promote development and redevelopment of the waterfront and selected parcels within the overall study area.
- Promote mixed-use development.
- Provide river access.

**Balancing a livable downtown and tourism.**
- Identify the residents needs vs. tourist needs.
- Establish improved quality of life against economic development.
- Preserve the environment and increase economic activity.

**Improving the aesthetic quality of the urban street experience.**
- Enhance the streetscapes.
- Improve the building facades.
- Prioritize pedestrian and bicyclist needs.

**Preservation of historic areas.**
- Create historic overlay district(s).
- Create design guidelines that address architectural style, height and viewshed ordinances, signage and lighting.
- Inventory historic building stock.

**Reversing the decline population.**
- Develop a clear identity in the region.
- Promote home ownership.
- Offer public amenities that improve the overall quality of life.
Brief History of Rensselaer

The City of Rensselaer has a rich and colorful history that dates back three hundred years. During that time, the City has experienced many changes that have been both positive and negative. In order to understand how Rensselaer evolved and the associated trends, it is important to review both the history and the planning process of Rensselaer.

Rensselaer's history has largely been shaped by its geographic location. The City is not only located along the Hudson River, which provides exceptional access to the Atlantic, but is also situated in close proximity to downtown Albany, the seat of New York State government. As a result of this strategic location, Rensselaer has been afforded many opportunities throughout its history. The current location resulted from a small part of the 1628 grant of lands of the first patroon, Kiljaen Van Rensselaer who purchased approximately 700,000 acres of land extending along both sides of the Hudson River. The City was originally Van Rensselaer's Manor of Rensselaerwyck. This land was chosen by Van Rensselaer not only for its important location in an area with a fertile flood plain and clear streams, but also for its proximity to Fort Orange (located near what is now Broadway in downtown Albany).

The early years of Rensselaer's development were slow. Early 17th century records note that Van Rensselaer transported many families to the area to work on the estate and those families comprised the majority of the population. By the late 17th Century, Rensselaer was commonly known as "t'Greyn Bos" which meant "green woods" because of the large numbers of pine trees which grew along the shore. Eventually this name would be anglicized to what we know today as "Greenbush".

By 1709, Van Rensselaer's son inherited a tract of land that included a small house and farm. The area was named "Crailo" after the Van Rensselaer estate in Holland. Eventually this tract would be fortified and used as shelter during local uprisings. The Van Rensselaer family held "Fort Crailo" until 1870. Recently Fort Crailo was restored to its 18th century appearance and was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Over the next hundred years, Rensselaer's settlement patterns were sparse compared to the rapid growth across the river in Albany. Most settlement occurred along the Hudson River and major transportation corridors (Columbia Avenue, Third Avenue, Washington Avenue, and the "farmers turnpike" which was later renamed Broadway) and consisted of a number of inns and businesses, which complemented the City of Albany. The City was formally incorporated in 1897. At that time, there were increasing numbers of organized streets and two rail lines extending through the City. The City was composed of three established villages in the area - East Albany, Greenbush, and Bath-on-Hudson.

During the time of its incorporation, Rensselaer was beginning to experience its own population boom. This boom was largely due to the growth and development of the railroad industry. As the railroads expanded, the associated shops, docks, and related businesses grew and spread in the adjacent areas. History notes that the railroad was a driving force in encouraging the incorporation of Rensselaer as a city. As the railroad industry grew, Rensselaer became known as the most important railroad terminus east of Chicago as it formed the main connection with the larger cities of Boston, New York, and...
Buffalo. By the early 20\textsuperscript{th} Century, Rensselaer was well known as a center for commercial development with the principal railroads (including the Troy and New England Electric Railroad, the New York Central and Hudson River Railroad, and the Delaware and Hudson Railroad) converging in this region. Rensselaer’s railroad industry initially focused on transportation of freight. However, in 1969 Albany’s passenger train station was moved due to rising costs and relocated in Rensselaer. Today Rensselaer’s station is Amtrak’s ninth busiest station in the nation (Capital District Transportation Authority 1999).

The Planning Process in Rensselaer

In the late 1960s, as construction of the large-scale development projects began (the Amtrak Station and the Dunn Memorial Bridge), the city officials recognized that Rensselaer did not have a land use plan. During this period of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Rensselaer began conducting an analysis of their inventory and their goals for the upcoming years. The development of these land use plans was made possible due to Federal 701 grants given to cities to undertake such planning projects.

Rensselaer’s planning has been a process by which each plan and analysis has built on those conducted before it and in accordance with the City’s goals. Furthermore, each of Rensselaer’s plans has gone thorough the process of public comment and has been reviewed and evaluated by the citizens through a series of meetings. The City of Rensselaer has been developing its plans in a continual process building on the premise that the county is not a self-contained entity but rather is a significant part of the much larger metropolitan area. Planning therefore has been concerned with the larger region. The City of Rensselaer’s Zoning Ordinance and Subdivision regulations both date from January 1979.
City of Rensselaer
Central Areas

Map 3:
Current Zoning
Transportation

The major issue facing Rensselaer's first land use plans involved the 1962 South Mall project that was taking place in Albany. The Mall's plans included a highway system, which would be known as the "South Mall Expressway" linked to the Interstate Highway system. The expressway was designed to cross over the Hudson and into the City of Rensselaer via the Dunn Memorial Bridge. The Rensselaer side of the expressway would consist of a series of arterial loops ultimately connecting with Interstate 90 in the eastern section of Rensselaer County. While even the latest plans for the Expressway show the arterial connection in Rensselaer, the connection was never completed. While the official reason remains a mystery, it is possible to deduce from the city's land use plans why the project was rejected in Rensselaer.

One potential reason for the City's negative response to the South Mall Expressway was noted in the Transportation Analysis of 1972. According to projections conducted concerning technology and culture, the document futuristically indicated that by 1990 bridges would be obsolete because "there may be opportunities for technologically sophisticated alternate modes (of transportation) such as hydrofoils" (Rensselaer County Department of Planning and Promotion 1972, 4). Furthermore, the document suggested that telecommunications technology in the 1990s would be so advanced that people would not need to physically travel to a location, further making such an arterial expressway obsolete. While telecommunications has had a large impact on travel behavior, it has not obliterated the need for automobile transportation.

While the obsolescence of a major expressway provided one reason for rejection of the plan, the Rensselaer Land Use Plan of 1972 provided a more rational reason as to why the expressway was not in the best interest of the City. According to the goals stated in the plan (Rensselaer County Department of Planning and Promotion 1972, 7) one of the primary concerns was that "the siting and scale of all structures, including roads, should be harmonious with and sensitive to the area and an asset to the site on which it is located." In this light, the expressway was viewed as out-of-scale with the surrounding area. Consequently, one of the primary recommendations of this plan was to explore alternatives to the expressway plan, which would both allow for the increased traffic flow and also be in harmony with the character of the city. The importance of maintaining harmony was again echoed in Rensselaer's Transportation Plan of 1973.

Another concern regarding the South Mall Expressway is expressed in Rensselaer's Transportation Analysis of 1972. The analysis points out that while a highway extension in Rensselaer County was important, there were many development and traffic-generation issues that needed to be addressed. While many of these topics revolve around the previous land use plans of the City which require harmony between new construction and the city character, there are other concerns at stake. The document stated that historically businesses develop rapidly as a result of increased traffic flow from a major roadway. This same phenomenon was demonstrated in the late 18th century when businesses sprouted along Columbia and Third Avenue in Rensselaer. The document further declared that transportation corridors provide a strong incentive to land development, that it was important for the City (and the county) to determine the
direction it wanted to take with respect to its future character. In this light, it was important for the City to determine if their future development plans will coincide with the scale of a major expressway. The document stated that "transportation improvements must support new urban development but not encourage sprawl by racing ahead of it" (Rensselaer County Department of Planning and Promotion 1972, 10). This premise has been used in subsequent planning documents for both the City and the Rensselaer County.

Another focus of this document is the issue of declining property values as a result of large-scale development. When landowners find out that their property is scheduled to be demolished or drastically altered, they tend to avoid investing time or money into it. Maintenance is discouraged and land values become depressed. Furthermore, there is a feeling on the part of the local government that it is pointless to enforce housing codes and concentrate police protection on an area that may be demolished in the near future. As the quality of life in these neighborhoods declines, the commercial services begin to move out in search of better areas. This theory was proven true when Rensselaer experienced an exodus of businesses in response to the impending construction of the expressway.

From this dialogue about alternative development patterns related to the South Mall Expressway came a discussion and recognition of transportation in the area as a whole. The policies and concepts addressed in the Transportation Analysis of 1972 have served as basic rules for Rensselaer's transportation development. Primarily, the analysis explained the need for grade-separated networks with respect to automobile traffic. Studies conducted showed that arteries with many driveways are "dominated by conflict and danger...the chaos of unpredictable turns and cross traffic can never mix with safe through traffic" (Rensselaer County Department of Planning and Promotion 1972, 51). The document argued the need for median control, grade-separated intersections, jug handles, and service roads.

Another transportation theme apparent in Rensselaer's planning documents involves encouraging and developing alternative modes of transportation to the automobile. The Land Use Plan of 1972 proposed that concentration of development in the City of Rensselaer would lend itself to alternative modes of mass transportation. As a result, traffic would be alleviated and those who do not own a car could easily get around the city. Alternative modes of transportation were also discussed in the Transportation Analysis of 1972. One of the goals from the analysis was that Rensselaer should use a multi-modal system with a mix of transportation alternatives. As a result, there would be a reduced dependence on a single mode (such as the automobile). Furthermore, reduced automobile dependence could be assisted through improvements in public transit and through "designed proximity of recreation, shopping, and work areas and designed pedestrian networks" (Rensselaer County Department of Planning and Promotion 1972, 3). The concept of pedestrian networks was discussed as a proposal for grade-separated networks and pedestrian walkways throughout the city. Another significant contribution of this document was that it referred to the advances made in this type of planning in both Wisconsin and Oregon where state action required pedestrian and bicycle network planning.
The concept of research into alternate modes of transportation was built upon in the *Transportation Plan* of 1973. The plan first announced that page 22 of the April 1973 New York State *Statewide Master Plan for Transportation* mentioned under the section "Policy Changes for Urban Transportation" that "the department will cooperate with local communities to encourage development of comprehensive plans for safe bicycle travel.... Walking should be made safer and more convenient" (Rensselaer County Department of Planning and Promotion 1973, 32). This plan not only encouraged alternate modes of transportation, but also provided the location of government assistance in the planning of these modes.

It appears that in response to this, the *Transportation Plan* of 1973 addressed the alternative modes of bicycling and walking. It referred to programs that had been successful in other cities and might be successful in Rensselaer. One example was the "Tracks to Trails" program where abandoned railroad tracks were converted into bike trails. The plan also discusses the advantages of using "official mapping techniques" to develop a network of bike trails all throughout the area. The plan also built upon the concepts from the *Transportation Analysis* by discussing the need for sidewalks along principle arterials and for pedestrian networks separate from vehicular traffic. It was believed that these networks would lead to significant neighborhood destinations and coordinate with public transportation stops.

**Parks and Open Space**

In addition to transportation planning, the City of Rensselaer addressed the concept of parks and open space in one of its earliest plans. The *Rensselaer County Future* plan (Rensselaer County Department of Planning and Promotion 1970, 32) stated that "the whole experience of beautiful scenery can be destroyed if an eyesore intrudes in the view." Building on this philosophy, *Rensselaer County Future* (Rensselaer County Department of Planning and Promotion 1970, 32) described the need for more public parks and open spaces by remarking "a great opportunity exists for recreational development, key to a rapidly growing population with more leisure time and money." In 1972, open space preservation was again mentioned in the *Land Use Plan/Policy* where open space preservation was among the top goals for the city.

**Waterfront**

At the same time that open space preservation is discussed, a vision of the Rensselaer waterfront emerged. *Rensselaer County Future* (Rensselaer County Department of Planning and Promotion 1970, 33) noted that "the new and dynamic image being created on the west side of the Hudson by the expenditure of vast sums of money for buildings and roads deserves a parallel of open space on the east shore...a waterfront park strip could help the revitalization and cleanup of the waterfront areas and complement the fresh image being created on the west bank." In 1981, the *Riverfront Development Plan* (Rensselaer Planning and Development Agency, 1981) was released. This plan addressed the means by which Rensselaer could develop its waterfront to become a vibrant attraction to the City. Furthermore, it tied the riverfront development with downtown redevelopment. The plan also took into account the overall open space preservation
considerations expressed in previous land use plans and proposed a course of action accordingly. Most recently in 1998, the City of Rensselaer received a $593,000 grant for riverfront development. Later that year, the City received additional grants also for riverfront development (Times Union June 16, 1999). Civic leaders are currently studying successful riverfronts in other communities to determine how to spend the grant money.

Housing

Rensselaer County Future (1970) articulated the need for increased housing and housing types to meet the requirement of the future community. It asserted that ordinances would need to be changed to accommodate different types of housing styles (such as garden apartments, cluster developments, and town houses). Regarding the development of housing, the document reiterated the notion of blending into the landscape and environment in an effort to maintain the harmony of the character of the area. The document further went on to propose that the county government become involved in the process to make sure that housing exists for those who were aged and those who could not afford adequate shelter. The same sentiments were expressed in the Land Use Plan/Policy, which pointed out the need for new housing to replace aging structures.

While the City has conducted extensive investigation into housing types and projects, the City has been relatively slow to bring these projects to fruition. Only in recent years has the City taken moves to develop the housing it requires. In 1987, the City of Rensselaer was awarded a $300,000 grant from the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development to upgrade 60 apartments in the area south and west of Interstate 90. With up to $5,000 available for each apartment unit, both low and moderate-income housing units were upgraded. In 1992, the city spent $375,000 to renovate 65 units in 39 buildings under the Housing and Community Acts Small Cities Program (Times Union September 6, 1992). Additionally, approximately 50 homes were renovated in the Train Station area with funds from Department of Housing and Urban Developments HOMEI and HOMEII programs.

The City has failed to develop major new housing projects. In the mid-1980s the Chateau Rensselaer, a 17-story 171-unit condominium tower, never materialized despite funding. Later, plans for three 17-story apartment towers on the site were also rejected. Additionally, a 1987 plan (Times Union July 31, 1987) for a large-scale $22 million condominium development was still on the drawing boards in 1990 and was eventually rejected. Most recently, the Rensselaer Common Council has expressed very reasonable reservations about the Patriot's Landing project. The project would be a mix of apartment styles catering to low and moderate income residents. While the developer has assured the City that funding has already been secured for the project, Council Members have suggested that the project would be out of harmony with the surrounding area (a 13-story tower building in a neighborhood of 2-to-3 story buildings), would have access problems in times of emergency, and would have adverse effects on both the environment and the dedication of services in the city of Rensselaer (Times Union July 9, 1999).
**Historic Preservation**

The treatment of the historic elements had also been addressed by City land use plans. *Rensselaer County Future* (Rensselaer County Department of Planning and Promotion 1970, 35) noted that "government can do its part by designating historic sites and areas, by creating historic zones, by setting up historic preservation commissions, and by providing matching financial support where necessary." The *Land Use Plan/Policy* reaffirmed this idea by proposing that areas of historic value should be identified and "maintained in that use where possible, or a compatible use" (Rensselaer County Department of Planning and Promotion 1970, 7). Furthermore, the plan noted that these areas deserve special protection and suggested the establishment of a local historic landmark commission.

**Downtown Revitalization**

Another long-standing significant issue throughout Rensselaer's planning process has been revitalization of its downtown. Even the 1972 *Transportation Plan* indicated that there needed to be an improvement in the circulation patterns of people in the downtown center. With the decline in population and land values, many downtown businesses have moved out of Rensselaer for other locations. While all the City's planning documents indicate the goal of downtown revitalization, Rensselaer has been relatively unsuccessful in adopting a downtown redevelopment plan. In May 1992, a $200 million 75-acre downtown redevelopment project fell through due to a lack of consensus of City officials. As an article in the *Times Union* (September 6, 1992) stated, this project was the third major redevelopment plan abandoned by a developer in Rensselaer since 1990.

**Planning in the 1990s**

Perhaps one of the most well-known recent development plans for Rensselaer involves the Amtrak train station. As previously mentioned, the relocation of the region's train station from Albany to Rensselaer had a profound impact on the development and character of the City as the train station became the ninth busiest station in the nation. In recent years, the City has acknowledged the importance of building a larger station to accommodate the increasing numbers of travelers utilizing the area. The Amtrak station complex was first presented in 1995 by architect Frank Gilmore who felt the complex would give "a new town center for the city, senior housing, a moderately priced hotel with conference center, a secure parking garage and an upper-level concourse called Rensselaer Boulevard" (*Times Union* May 4, 1995). The $80 million new station is currently under construction and is scheduled to be completed by the middle of 2000.

In 1986, James Atkinson, a columnist for the *Times Union*, described Rensselaer as a city of possibilities. He commented that (*Times Union* May 6, 1986) "The City is located in an historically significant area. It's on the riverfront; it has competitive housing costs. There's a lot of possibility to control and guide the development." Thirteen years later, developers are still proposing plans and projects for the "city of possibilities". However, much like Rensselaer's early years, the city has been slow to move to take advantage of its unique opportunities.
Demographics

Demographics in the City of Rensselaer have changed dramatically over the past few decades. This change has been due to issues such as changing birth rates, changing employment opportunities, and migration to other cities in the Capital District. Often, the demographic trends experienced by Rensselaer County are similar to those experienced by the City of Rensselaer itself, especially with respect to demographic trends from the early part of the 20th century. According to the 1990 US Census, the population of the Central Areas of the City of Rensselaer – the study areas for this Studio - was 3,326.

Rensselaer County Analysis

At the turn of the century, Rensselaer County’s economic profile consisted primarily of farming and industry along the Hudson River. As the economy began to shift away from farming and towards other types of industry, population growth was slight – only 600 people. With the onset of World War I, much of the state enjoyed prosperity while Rensselaer County lost 9,200 residents and many jobs. During the 1920’s, population began to increase again. However, while the Capital District as a whole increased by 11%, Rensselaer County increased by only 6%. This same type of population growth profile continued during the depression where the Capital District rose by 2.1% and the county rose by 1.7%, bringing the county’s population back up to the level it was at in 1900.

During the second half of the century, Rensselaer County had a much different profile. Growth rates until the late 1970s averaged 7% for Rensselaer County. While this represents one of the highest growth rates in the county for this century, it is still lower than comparable averages. During this same period of time, the nation experienced a growth rate of 14.5%, the state experienced a growth of 10%, and the Capital District as a whole experienced a growth of 20%.

In the 1990 census, Rensselaer County was found to have a population of 154,429. Of these people, 36,842 were under age 18 and 20,414 were 65 years old or over. By 1997 estimates, there were 153,743 people living in Rensselaer County compared with 294,074 living in Albany County and 18,146,200 people living in New York State. A year later, estimates were showing a 0.7% loss in population from Rensselaer County compared with a 0.5% loss from Albany County and a 0.002% increase in New York State as a whole (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geographic Area:</th>
<th>1997 Estimate</th>
<th>1998 Estimate</th>
<th>Change</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New York State</td>
<td>18,146,200</td>
<td>18,175,301</td>
<td>29,101</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albany County, NY</td>
<td>294,074</td>
<td>292,586</td>
<td>-1,488</td>
<td>-0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rensselaer County, NY</td>
<td>153,743</td>
<td>152,689</td>
<td>-1,054</td>
<td>-0.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Population changes in 1997 and 1998 in New York State, Albany County and Rensselaer County, New York.
It is noteworthy that household income in Rensselaer County has increased dramatically over the past decades (Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income</th>
<th>1949</th>
<th>1969</th>
<th>1989</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than $5,000</td>
<td>78.8%</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$5,000 - $9,999</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>44.6%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10,000 - $14,999</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$15,000 and over</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>79.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Income</td>
<td>$3,298</td>
<td>$8,500</td>
<td>$31,958</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Rensselaer County Family Income for 1949, 1969 and 1989.

**City of Rensselaer Analysis**

While it is important to note the demographic trends of the Rensselaer County in comparison with surrounding areas, it is also important to note the difference in demographic trends of the City of Rensselaer. For more than half of the 20th century, the City basically paralleled the County statistics. It was not until the late 1960s that the difference between the City and County became more evident. When looking at the demographics of the City of Rensselaer, the population decline is much more pronounced. Between the years of 1960 to 1970, the City declined by 3.5% compared with the County increase of 7.0%. Between 1970 and 1980, the City declined by 13.0% while the County declined by 2.5% (Table 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City of Rensselaer</td>
<td>10,508</td>
<td>10,136</td>
<td>8,819</td>
<td>-3.5%</td>
<td>-13.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rensselaer County</td>
<td>142,585</td>
<td>152,510</td>
<td>148,776</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td>-2.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Population Trends of the City of Rensselaer and Rensselaer County.

However, it is important to note that while there is a pronounced population change in the City of Rensselaer, this drop may be similar to trends experienced by other major cities in the Capital District. This drop may therefore indicate some external factor such as continuing public preference to reside in the suburbs. This phenomenon is evident in the 1990 census figures compared with 1998 Census Bureau estimates for the cities of Rensselaer and Albany in 1998. In 1990, Rensselaer had 8,255 residents compared with an Albany population of 100,031. By 1998, Rensselaer’s population had dropped 6.2% compared with an Albany population drop of 5.7% (Table 4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>1998</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Albany</td>
<td>100,031</td>
<td>94,305</td>
<td>-5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rensselaer</td>
<td>8,255</td>
<td>7,741</td>
<td>-6.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Population trends of Albany and Rensselaer for 1990 and 1998 census (Census Bureau estimates).

However, while the population figures indicate similar population changes in these cities, there are also statistics that reflect issues unique to the City of Rensselaer. One of these concerns deals those who choose to live and work in a city. Figures compiled by the
Capital District Regional Planning Commission indicate that only approximately 25% of Albany’s residents work elsewhere, while the corresponding percentage for Rensselaer is 75%. This figure indicates that for much of the City of Rensselaer’s population, the City is merely a bedroom community.

Housing construction is another indicator that often concurs with both real and anticipated population growth. As Chart 1 demonstrates, residential construction boomed in the early 1980s in anticipation of major growth. However, in reaction to the actual declining population during the 1980s, residential construction fell off almost to zero. There was a brief resurgence of residential construction in the early 1990’s, but current levels are very low.

![City of Rensselaer New Homes Built Per Year 1980-1997](chart)

**Chart 1: Residential Building Construction in the City of Rensselaer 1980 – 1997.**

As a point of comparison, the City of Rensselaer received requests for 96 construction permits during 1995 while the City of Albany received 666 permit requests. Another interesting comparison is that housing values are significantly lower in the City of Rensselaer (topping at $100,000) than in the City of Albany (topping around $312,000).

Population projections for Rensselaer have changed considerably over the past few decades. In 1970, *Rensselaer County Future* anticipated a baby boom around 1975 (which did happen) but it also anticipated that the City of Rensselaer would see a 36% increase in growth between 1980 and 1990 (which it did not). Additionally, in April of 1978 the Capital District Regional Planning Commission (CDRPC) was anticipating the City of Rensselaer would have approximately 9,700 residents by the mid 1980s and approximately 11,000 by the year 2000 (compared with County population of 165,300 and 182,500 respectively). This projection was disproven, as the 1990 census figures showed the City of Rensselaer to have 8,255 residents, and 1997 estimates show Rensselaer County at 153,743 residents. Finally, the latest population projections by the CDRPC estimate that between the years 1995 and 2015, the City of Rensselaer will experience a drop of 251 residents.
**METHODOLOGY**

The Summer Studio 1999 is the third University at Albany project for the City of Rensselaer. Prior projects were completed in the summer of 1998 and the spring of 1999.

**UAlbany Summer Studio 1998**

In the summer of 1998, a studio project focused on the area bordering the train station, specifically Broadway, Partition Street, East Street, Third Avenue and the waterfront. The goal of the project was to integrate the proposed Amtrak Station Renovation project cohesively into the City of Rensselaer, both visually and economically.

Before preparing the proposed plan, the Studio team gathered a significant amount of data on the study area. The data collected included land use, building condition, visual characteristics, demographics and a list of future approved and funded projects. The final product of the Studio was an alternative plan for the Amtrak Station Renovation project that concentrated the urban core around the station and articulated more directly with the waterfront.

**UAlbany Urban Design and Site Planning – Spring 1999**

This course focused on five neighborhoods (Table 5) selected jointly with the City of Rensselaer. The class was divided into five teams and the teams collected primary and secondary data for their specific area. Primary data included land use, building type, condition, age; road, sidewalk and street landscape type and quality; overall terrain characteristics; visual character; visual nodes; landmarks; and significant views. Secondary data included maps, topography, census, zoning, city plans, coastal zone documents, waterfront plans and documents relating the history of the city’s development. Each team prepared a final document that identified the important issues for each area, proposed solutions for the issues and generated design options to improve the urban quality.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team</th>
<th>Geographic Boundaries of the Study Areas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Interstate 90 on the West, the North Greenbush town line to the North, Rock Cut Road on the East and the Van Allen Park area to the South.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>North of Central Avenue to Interstate 90 and from Forbes Avenue on the West to Tenth Street to the East.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>North of Partition Street to Central Avenue and east from the Hudson River to Seventh Street.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Third Avenue North to Partition Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Third Avenue on the North, Riverside Avenue on the West, Columbia Avenue to the South and Grove Street to the East.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 5: Geographic boundaries for each study area in the Spring 1999 Urban Design and Site Planning class conducted at the University of Albany.*
UAlbany Summer Studio 1999

This Studio builds on the data collection phases of the two prior University at Albany projects to create an overall vision for the Central Areas of the City of Rensselaer. Working jointly with the Planning Committee of the City, the following sections describe the process the Studio team performed in completing the project.

Phase 1 – Data Collection and Analysis

Ten students were involved in this studio project and teams were formed to cover specific target areas for data collection. These target areas were defined as follows: Waterfront, Train Station and Downtown. (Please refer to each target area section in this document for more information identifying the geographic area studied.) The Studio team met with the City Planning Committee at the onset of the project to elicit their views on the issues for the area as well as ideas for a future vision of Rensselaer.

Land Use

The project area consists of a mixture of land uses including residential, commercial, office, industrial and community services. These categories are defined in Table 6 and Map 4:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Residential</td>
<td>One-family; two-family, or multi-family dwellings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>Retail, eateries, taverns, pay parking, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Space</td>
<td>Undeveloped and/or maintained green areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial</td>
<td>Manufacturing or processing of raw materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal</td>
<td>Buildings housing public officials or functions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking</td>
<td>Existing parking areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacant</td>
<td>Undeveloped, overgrown, or neglected parcels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Facility</td>
<td>Services provided by public or private entities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Park/Recreation</td>
<td>Active and passive parks or recreational facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential/Commercial Mixed Use</td>
<td>Commercial with housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office/Professional</td>
<td>Office buildings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>Land associated with the rail station facilities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Land use definitions for the Central Areas in the City of Rensselaer.
City of Rensselaer
Central Areas

Map 4:
Land-Use
Summer 1999
**Parcel Data**

The parcel data was divided into six categories: **Land Use**, **Building**, **Retail**, **Parcel**, **Parking** and **Landscaping**. For each category, a set of characteristics were identified and recorded (Table 7).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Land Use</td>
<td>Type or function of structure on parcel(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building</td>
<td>Number of stories, age, condition, occupancy and historic significance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Noted type of activity and presence of housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parcel</td>
<td>Upkeep and presence of fencing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking</td>
<td>Number of spaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landscaping</td>
<td>Presence of trees and other landscaping features</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 7: Summary of parcel data categories and associated characteristics.*

With the exception of two categories, data collected was as indicated in Table 7. However, the **Building** and **Parcel** categories required a numeric score to rate the **condition** of the building and the **upkeep** of the parcel. For each structure observed, an overall score was given based on its condition. Map 5 depicts building condition.

Parcel **upkeep** was rated according to the scale in Table 8:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 – Excellent</th>
<th>Well maintained vegetation and/or landscaping.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 – Average</td>
<td>Some evidence of maintenance, some vegetation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 – Poor</td>
<td>Overgrown and neglected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 – Critical</td>
<td>Derelict and/or no signs of maintenance and/or landscaping.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 8: Numeric scale used to define the upkeep characteristic for the parcel data collection category.*
City of Rensselaer
Central Areas

Map 5:
Building Condition
Summer 1999
**Visual Analysis**

In terms of visual characteristics, the city has wonderful views of the Hudson River and Downtown Albany from certain areas. On the other hand, the streetscapes are marred by a profusion of utility lines and poles detracting from the general appearance of the city. In addition to collecting data pertinent to the land parcels, visual quality data of respective streets was also collected, providing a better understanding and feel for the overall visual experience while visiting Rensselaer.

The data were collected by segments (both sides of the street) along the particular street. The data collected were divided into seven general categories: Roads, Sidewalks, Landscape Elements, Utility Lines, Street Lighting, Signage and Parks (Table 9).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Characteristics:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roads</td>
<td>Surface material and condition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sidewalks</td>
<td>Width, surface material and condition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landscape Elements</td>
<td>Type of trees, size, spacing and other observed landscape features</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utility Lines</td>
<td>Type and spacing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street Lighting</td>
<td>Type, height and spacing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signage</td>
<td>Type and location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parks</td>
<td>Type, condition and activity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9: Summary of right-of-way data collected and associated characteristics.

**Roads**

For **surface material**, the material used to pave the roadways was noted. Table 10 identifies the numeric scale used to rate **condition**.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 – Excellent</th>
<th>No visual evidence of needed repair.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 – Average</td>
<td>Some signs of wear, but no substantial structural issues visible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 – Poor</td>
<td>Significant signs of wear and several areas in need of repair.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 – Critical</td>
<td>Substantial structural issues evident throughout.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10: Numeric scale used to rate pavement condition.

**Sidewalks**

Approximate **width** in feet and **surface material** used to construct the sidewalk was noted. Table 11 identifies the numeric scale used to rate **condition**.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 – Excellent</th>
<th>No visual evidence of needed repair.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 – Average</td>
<td>Some signs of wear, but no substantial structural issues visible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 – Poor</td>
<td>Significant signs of wear and several areas in need of repair.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 – Critical</td>
<td>Substantial structural issues evident throughout.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11: Numeric scale used to rate sidewalk condition.
Landscape Elements

If trees were present, the type, size (in terms of height) and spacing were noted. Additional landscape features were identified and described. Table 12 indicates the numeric scale used for rating landscape features of the street segment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 – Excellent</th>
<th>Presence of both trees and a grass planting strip.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 – Average</td>
<td>Presence of either trees or a grass planting strip.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 – Poor</td>
<td>Presence of a planting strip that was paved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 – Critical</td>
<td>No trees or planting strips.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12: Numeric scale used to rate landscape elements.

Utility Lines

For this category, if utility poles were present, type and spacing were noted. A score was determined by characterizing the presence of the poles as visually detracting and given the numeric value of three for Poor. If no poles were present, then it was considered an asset to the visual quality of the street and was given the numeric value of one for Excellent.

Street Lighting

There were two types of streetlights, cobra and extension, identified in this study area. The height and spacing were also noted. The score was determined by appropriateness of the type of light to the area in which it was located. If the type of light was appropriate for the area, then it received a numeric value of one for Excellent. If the light was not an appropriate type or if lights were lacking, then a score of three for Poor was noted.

Signage

The type of sign and its location was recorded. There was no numeric score attached to this category.

Parks

The type of park and the presence of activity at the time of observation were recorded. The condition was rated according to the scale in Table 13.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Well maintained landscaping and/or modern facilities/equipment.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Well maintained landscaping and/or outdated facilities/equipment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>No evidence of landscape maintenance and/or outdated facilities/equipment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>No landscaping and/or lack of facilities/equipment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 13: Numeric scale used to rate park condition.
**Computing an Overall Score**

For each segment of the street, an average was calculated using the scores described above. For the whole street, an average was calculated by category to show the overall strengths and weaknesses. A final score was calculated by averaging the street category scores to determine a score for the entire street. Table 14 shows the scale was used to rank the averages:

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>0 to 1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>1.5 to 2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>2.5 to 3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>3.5 to 4.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 14: Summary of final score categories used to rate the visual quality of the streets.

**Phase 2 – Identifying Areas of Opportunity and Areas of Strength**

The next phase of the project involved identifying areas of opportunity and strength. *Opportunities* are areas that benefit from major improvements, ranging from conservation and/or restoration of buildings to full-scale development. Areas of *strength* are locations that can be retained in their current state coupled with minor improvements. Both areas are identified based upon systematic review of the data collected.

This information was then depicted graphically using ESRI’s ArcView© Geographic Information Systems software. Map 6 identifies areas of opportunity and strength for the entire study section. Details for each sub-area are described in the specified sections of this document.

The final step of this phase included a presentation to the City Planning Committee by each group to describe their areas of opportunity and areas of strength, and to propose preliminary recommendations for improvements. The purpose of the presentation was to incorporate community involvement into the planning process and the City Planning Committee was encouraged to comment and question the ideas initiated by each group.
City of Rensselaer
Central Areas

Map 6:
Areas of Opportunity
Phase 3 – Final Project Recommendations

Through comparative analysis of similar locations and further investigation and examination of data collected, groups formulated recommendations for each area of opportunity or area of strength. Existing land use relationships were studied and successful relationships identified were endorsed to be replicated. For land use relationships that were not compatible, alternatives and solutions are offered. These recommendations intend to complement and improve the existing conditions of each area.

Study area teams prepared written material as well as an oral presentation for the City Planning Committee. These materials include several photo simulations created using Adobe Photoshop© software to manipulate pictures of selected locations and present team ideas in a visual manner. The culmination of the entire Studio project is presented here in this document.
WATERFRONT STUDY AREA

The City of Rensselaer has a lengthy association with the Hudson River. Rensselaer's initial settlement was along its banks and throughout the nineteenth century, the waterfront supported a lively complex of piers, warehouses and boat yards. Later, the Port of Rensselaer became an important transportation center for local industries. Currently the waterfront is the home to several public parks. Each of these elements add significance to the waterfront of Rensselaer, however, unfortunate land use decisions have jeopardized its integrity. Land uses not dependent on water dominate the waterfront. Public river access is poor and transportation infrastructure isolates the waterfront from the rest of the City.

The waterfront study area comprises the land extending southward from the City Boat Launch to the intersection of Riverside Avenue and Belmore Place. Importantly, the study area contains one and a half miles of underutilized shoreline.

To aid field data collection, the waterfront study area was divided into four target areas. The northern area includes the City Boat Launch, the land between the riverbank and the CSX Corporation tracks and Upper Broadway from Partition Street to MacNaughton Avenue. The middle two areas are west of Broadway from the Rensselaer Junior/Senior High School to Riverfront Park. The last area includes Broadway and Riverside Avenue south of Columbia Turnpike, including the waterfront sections of the Fort Crailo district. A primary goal is to connect all four areas with a functional and safe recreational path, the Rensselaer Riverwalk that has the potential to link the cities of Troy, Rensselaer and Albany.

Goals and Objectives

The City of Rensselaer is fortunate to occupy approximately four miles of Hudson River shoreline. However, Rensselaer undervalues this unique resource. To improve the vitality of the waterfront, four comprehensive objectives for the waterfront were devised: river access, historic preservation, redevelopment, and community awareness. The objectives highlight important elements absent from the waterfront and present several goals for each. Our primary objective is to enhance the waterfront as a node of activity and link the waterfront to the greater community.

River Access: Rensselaer lacks user-friendly access to the Hudson River. Goals related to improving river access include:

- Installing a Riverwalk trail.
- Prioritizing pedestrian and cyclist movements along the river.
- Promoting water-related cultural and recreational features.
- Improving Riverfront Park amenities.
**Historic Preservation:** A continuous settlement pattern dating from the 1600s has provided Rensselaer with a historically valuable building stock. Goals identified for historic preservation include:

- Creating an inventory of historic structures.
- Drafting urban design guidelines.
- Designating the Fort Crailo neighborhood as a historic district.
- Improving streetscapes and calming traffic.
- Preserving open space.
- Coordinating a historic preservation society.

**Redevelopment:** Inappropriate land uses are prevalent along the waterfront. Goals for redevelopment include:

- Removing non-water dependent land uses.
- Advocating mixed-use development for the Zappala Block and Junior/Senior High School properties.
- Expanding slips at the Albany Yacht Club.
- Addition of an Inn adjacent to the yacht club.
- Establishing a river-theme entertainment center.

**Community Awareness:** Employ the waterfront as a resource to restore a sense of community in Rensselaer. Community awareness goals include:

- Creating community wide awareness for the Hudson River.
- Sponsoring shoreline cleanup efforts.
- Establishing a nature center along the Quakendary Creek.
- Creating a river watch organization.

**Existing Conditions**

**City Boat Launch**

This portion of the waterfront study area, adjacent to the historic Bath neighborhood, consists of all parcels north of the Livingston Avenue Railroad Bridge to the boat ramp, east from the river to the CSX rail track (Figure 1) and Upper Broadway from Partition Street to MacNaughton Avenue. The City Boat Launch at the end of Forbes Avenue is a recreational node for the community. Residents use the deteriorated boat launch to float personal watercraft and fish. Boat launch users park vehicles alongside the unmarked train track. Adjacent to the track is a 12-foot wide gravel path along its entire length which represents a potential for future trail development. The Class I railroad line services a South Troy granary three times a week.
Figure 1: This photo shows the City Boat Launch in a state of disrepair. Note the asphalt piles and the limited concrete paving.

There are notable physical features in this area. The target area has a picturesque view of the Hudson River. The viewshed includes the Corning Preserve, the New York State Capitol, Empire State Plaza, and the rest of downtown Albany. The riparian environment consists of a pebbly shoreline fronting a 10 to 12 foot bluff and a cut in the bluff allows river access. At low tide, a sandy apron is present. South of the boat launch, stone riprap lines the heavily vegetated bluff. The dense tree growth ensures the stability of the bluff. Eastward from the bluff, the topography climbs toward Broadway.

Deterioration characterizes the City Boat Launch target area. Illegal dumping is evident throughout by the piles of asphalt and debris that litter the launch site. Discarded automobile tires accumulate along Forbes Avenue and debris collects along the rail track. Adjacent to the vacant Barnet Mills are several commercial buildings (Figure 2). These buildings house automobile repair shops. There are two private residences in the target area. One is along the waterfront and the other is located at the intersection of Tracy and Forbes Avenues. Interestingly, both avenues have brick pavers beneath a layer of asphalt. The land south of Tracy consists of undeveloped riverfront parcels, a County wastewater treatment facility and an overgrown pedestrian trail.
Figure 2: A view of the Class I train tracks owned by CSX Corporation looking south from the City Boat Launch. Note the wide right-of-way and the vacant Barnet Mills on the western side.

Notably, a riverfront parcel situated north of Tracy Avenue and alongside an extension of Forbes Avenue is contaminated, as petroleum fumes are emitted when the soil is disturbed. The parcel is immediately west of the rail line and a neglected chain link fence surrounds the waterfront property. Scrub and weedy vegetation cover the site and it contains numerous structures. A masonry platform with exposed piping resides in the northeast corner and to the south lies a small, abandoned shed. Dominating the center area is a gravel-lined pit of approximately four feet in depth.

The Upper Broadway area is primarily low-rise residential, with a few businesses scattered among the many two-family and multi-family structures. It is significant because it functions as a primary gateway to the City, particularly for vehicles coming from the north to the Train Station and Downtown Areas. It is also the main access route to the City Boat Launch area and to the proposed Patriots Landing project. It is crucial that this area is attractive and visually pleasing for the residents and to the many travelers passing through.
Riverfront Park is the largest public open space in Rensselaer (Figure 4) and is comprised of land leased from the State of New York. To serve city residents, the park provides several recreational amenities as well as Hudson River views. It has a well-used and popular ballfield, basketball and tennis courts, and picnic tables. The park center contains a wooden gazebo. A small kiosk informs visitors of a nearby peregrine falcon nest. During afternoon hours, a hot dog vendor operates a stand along Broadway adjacent to the park. The southern field of the park contains a landscaped circle with two benches that flank the Peoples Clock, a pedestal clock commemorating the history of Rensselaer. The park’s single greatest attribute are the numerous and varied murals that grace the Dunn Memorial Bridge supports. Community activism is responsible for the creation and the upkeep of these murals painted by city school children. These murals provide Rensselaer with a sense of community.
Figure 4: This photo shows the popular ballfield that centers Riverfront Park. The Dunn Memorial Bridge appears towards the west and there are elements of the Albany skyline in the background.

Fifth Avenue, Mill Creek and numerous highway ramps and supports fragment the park, and there is an abrupt edge along Broadway. Riverfront Park also suffers from poor signage and parking. Immediately to the north of the park are Zappala Block and Hardware. These parcels have a combined acreage of 14.5 acres and produce a high level noise, congestion and traffic; features out of character with the park.

The heavily wooded Quakenday Creek separates Zappala Block from Rensselaer Junior/Senior High School. The school sits on a 25-acre parcel and has an impressive view of the State Capital Complex. Finally, the area contains two small retail operations: a laundry and American Sportswear. The American Sportswear building contains two housing units.

Fort Crailo

Fort Crailo lies south of the Broadway and Columbia Turnpike intersection (Figure 5). At Aiken Avenue, Broadway becomes Riverside Avenue. The neighborhood abuts the Port of Rensselaer and the industrial sector to the south. The target area is Rensselaer's primary waterfront neighborhood and two small parks provide river access. One park is located at the foot of Aiken Avenue and the second is directly across from Fort Crailo. The riverfront is similar to other parts of the waterfront as previously described with a narrow, inter-tidal zone backed by a bluff.
Figure 5: In Fort Crailo, Broadway is a pleasant tree-lined street with sidewalks on both sides.

Fort Crailo historic site anchors the waterfront target area and the surrounding neighborhood consists of a mixture of architecture styles (Figure 6). The styles range from the historic homestead to decorative Victorians and early twentieth-century row structures. Masonry and wood share prominence as building material. A majority of homes are privately owned. Scattered along Broadway and Aiken Avenue are several apartment units. Generally, the structures are in fair condition with bright paintwork. In addition to the rich hues, the structures exhibit numerous design elements. Mature maples line both Broadway and Riverside and a four-foot wide planter strip separate sidewalks from curbs. Decorative wrought iron fences border numerous homes and the buildings maintain a straight facade line. Finally, Aiken Avenue has planted medians. Many of these attractive urban features are absent from other parts of Rensselaer and should be preserved and enhanced.
The Fort Crailo waterfront contains several non-residential activities. The northern segment contains the Albany Yacht Club, Petro-Chem Mechanical Services and Buchanan & Butler Insurance. Midway down Broadway is the United Presbyterian Church. The Aiken House on the corner of Aiken Avenue and Broadway is undergoing a renovation and will eventually see service as an inn. Further south lies a small medical office at 28 Broadway Avenue and the County's Sewer Pump Station.

The Albany View
The unique geography of Rensselaer provides the city with special views. A thousand feet across the Hudson River lies the city of Albany (Figure 7). Along the waterfront, the slightly elevated Rensselaer High School parcel affords the best view of Albany's downtown skyline. In the foreground resides the former D&H Building, now SUNY-Central, with the Empire State Plaza rising behind it. The view from the City Boat Launch is less expansive. That view includes the Livingston Avenue Rail Bridge, the northeast district of Albany, and the greenness of the Corning Preserve. The Dunn Memorial Bridge limits the view from Riverfront Park. South of the park, the view is of the elevated I-787, Albany's Steamboat Square public housing, various small industrial sites, and the Port of Albany. It is unfortunate for Rensselaer that the beauty of Fort Crailo and the Albany Yacht Club faces these unappealing areas of Albany.
Opportunities

*The Rensselaer Riverwalk*

The shoreline is the City’s most underutilized asset and the City urgently needs to capitalize on this asset along the historic Hudson River. As outlined in the following sections, opportunities exist in all four sections of the Riverfront. This report proposes a Riverwalk which will unify the disconnected areas of the shoreline and act as a catalyst for change throughout the City. The Riverwalk will be the instrument to redirect public attention to the shoreline, and it will stimulate real estate development on some of the adjacent parcels.

This document proposes the creation of a Riverwalk that will extend north from Fort Crailo to the City Boat Launch. With a pedestrian path, Rensselaer will acknowledge the significance of the waterfront and have a basis for future renewal efforts. Eventually, the Riverwalk will merge with the existing regional trail system after modifications to the Livingston Avenue Bridge and the acquirement of a CSX railroad right-of-way. Ultimately, the Riverwalk will become a segment of a network of trails that will parallel the Hudson River from New York City to the Capital District.

The Riverwalk will be approximately two miles in length. The year-round facility will be a minimum of six feet wide and employ standardized design guidelines for surface materials, configuration and lighting. *People Places: Design Guidelines for Urban Open Spaces* by Marcus et al. (1998) is an excellent design reference. The walk will provide
residents with a recreational amenity suitable for strolling, jogging, cycling and cross-country skiing.

In the Fort Crailo target area, the Riverwalk will take on heritage trail characteristics and designation. Decorative brick pavers will outline the walk. Along the walk, interpretive signage will highlight historic homes and attractions. Signage will be in accordance with the regulations set forth in the historic overlay zone.

From the Fort Crailo neighborhood, the Riverwalk will follow Broadway through the central business district of Rensselaer. The Riverwalk will act as an economic stimulus by increasing pedestrian traffic to and through the Downtown. In addition, the Riverwalk will accentuate the district’s noteworthy architecture. Just north of Third Avenue, the walk will enter Riverfront Park.

An alternative Riverwalk alignment is a boardwalk that links the Albany Yacht Club to Riverfront Park. This alignment ensures a waterfront passage between the Fort Crailo neighborhood and Riverfront Park. However, the placement of Columbia Turnpike forces the boardwalk to skirt the outside edge of the turnpike. The alignment requires cantilevering the boardwalk from the riverbank to provide pedestrians with a safe distance from the turnpike. An engineering study is required to determine the feasibility of this alignment.

Inside Riverfront Park, the Riverwalk will continue northward and cross Mill Creek on a proposed bridge sited immediately west of the existing highway ramp (Figure 8). The bridge will afford panoramic views of the river and the adjacent shoreline. Riverwalk will continue northward into the proposed revitalized Zappala property.

Figure 8: The outlet of Mill Creek into the Hudson River and the proposed location of a pedestrian bridge that will link the two parts of Riverfront Park. Selective thinning of vegetation in this area will open views to the Albany Yacht Club.
There is an air of familiarity and quaintness in this community as children play and adults survey the actions of the street from their porches. This active street life and the lack of parks and green space in the area, however, present a few problems. Large groups of youth are seen gathering on the narrow sidewalks and occasionally spilling into the street in this northern part of Broadway. Children on bicycles come dangerously close to vehicles passing by because of the lack of adequate sidewalk space or other alternative play areas.

**Riverfront Park, Zappala Properties and Rensselaer School Properties**

Large parcels dominate the middle two target areas and include Riverfront Park, Zappala Block and Hardware, and the Rensselaer Junior/Senior High School (Figure 3). Broadway is a principal roadway in Rensselaer and forms the eastern boundary of this target area. City Hall and the Police Station are along this segment of Broadway and the volume of traffic is heavy as motorists use the Dunn Memorial Bridge to access Albany. This area contains both Mill and Quakendary Creeks. These channeled creeks drain from uplands to the east into the Hudson River.

Good views of the Hudson River and Downtown Albany are available from Riverfront Park on the south side of the Dunn Memorial Bridge. To the north of the bridge, however, all views are impeded by buildings, fences, trees, and lack of public access. It is ironic that the views to the north of the Dunn Memorial Bridge are much better than those to the south, and among the most spectacular in the whole Hudson Valley. The ongoing redevelopment of Downtown Albany, and the approaching 400th Anniversary of Henry Hudson’s historic voyage up the Hudson to the Rensselaer-Albany area in 2009, emphasizes the extraordinary potential of river access as a major stimulus to the comprehensive revitalization of the City of Rensselaer.
It is not feasible to place a trail directly along the shoreline fronting the Zappala property because of the accumulation of riprap, pylons and cables that litter the shoreline. These features reduce the width of the shoreline and an environmental survey should address their removal. The land on top of the bluff is better suited for the path. The walk alignment is north from Riverfront Park cutting across the Zappala property with the trail kept close to the edge of the bluff. A thinning of trees is a necessary to create view corridors of the river and Albany. This portion of the path should contain a placard describing the features of the Albany skyline. Further north, the trail encounters Quakendary Creek and will move inland to cross the stream by Broadway. This will prevent the disturbance of the creek and provide an ecological path between the Hudson River and interior habitats. The combination of ecosystems provides the greatest species diversity is an ideal location for a nature interpretative center. The center will have an observation deck. In association with citizen activists, the City can organize annual riverfront clean-ups. These clean-ups are a catalyst for the City to maintain the riverfront, promote sound land stewardship and increase environmental awareness. Rensselaer Riverwalk continues northward toward the City Boat Launch.

From the nature center, the Riverwalk will traverse the Amtrak facility. A joint Rensselaer/Albany waterfront development group recommended, in 1995, that a path be constructed on the CSX Corporation’s Livingston Avenue Bridge (LDR International 1995), thereby completing a loop from the Corning Preserve to the Dunn Memorial Bridge (Figure 9). This would necessitate bridge renovation with funding from CDTA, CDTC and possibly federal monies. This report strongly concurs with this prior recommendation. The Riverwalk again proceeds northward from this point, through several vacant lots, past the City Boat Launch and on to the CSX rail right-of-way. An easement is required in order to use the property along the track.

Figure 9: A diagram from the 1995 Riverfront Vision Concept Plan created by the Hudson Riverfront Design Team. The dotted black line depicts the proposed trail system that would link the Albany and Rensselaer waterfronts.
The City of Rensselaer is encouraged to engage in a cooperative effort with neighboring communities to the north and south in order to extend the Riverwalk (Map 7) regionally in both directions. Although this initiative is not crucial for Rensselaer in the present, extending the trail in the future will provide long-term benefits to the City as a whole.
Map 7: Proposed Riverwalk

- Proposed Riverwalk
- City of Rensselaer
- Boundary of Study Areas

City of Rensselaer Central Areas
Area 1

The northernmost development node along the waterfront is the City Boat Launch. The boat launch is moderately used. However, its location is somewhat inaccessible and the roads around the boat launch as well as the launch itself need some maintenance and realignment. Additionally, there is a shortage of parking in the immediate surrounding area.

There are several other deterrents to development in this target area. An active rail line bisects the area, just to the east of the boat launch. A few feet east of the track lies the vacant Barnet Mills building that is in critical condition. Just to the south, the shell of a former fuel processing plant is positioned. This site is contaminated with processing by-products. Finally, several existing small industrial uses dot the area.

Despite these constraints, several opportunities exist. The City Boat Launch area potentially affords safe and easy waterfront access. Recommended improvements will transform this area into an active focal point for the City of Rensselaer. Spillover economic benefits can become possible as a new and improved launch may draw additional visitors into the City. Prior industrial uses, such as the now vacant Barnet Mills property can be rehilitated into either commercial or light industrial uses. Adaptive re-use of such locations can provide a much-needed economic catalyst to the City. As a complementary component to the launch, a substantial amount of vacant land exists and can be developed into passive recreation sites. These sites can offer neighborhood residents and visitors additional opportunities to enjoy the Hudson River.

Proposals:

This report endorses an engineering study of the City Boat Launch to determine the cost of improving and updating the facility. This study should engage in a comprehensive investigation of the access road, parking, signage, rail safety and the launch site conditions to produce an effective plan for total improvement.

Additionally, an environmental assessment should be conducted on the Barnet Mills and former fuel facility properties to determine mitigation options. Once these sites are free of environmental hazards, they will become attractive waterfront development areas for investors. Finally, streetscape improvements to Upper Broadway should be a high priority.

The proposals for Upper Broadway build upon and improve its existing residential character. As a northern gateway, this area should be attractive, should improve the quality of life for the residents, and should communicate the City and neighborhood’s sense of pride. This report recommends refining the aesthetic quality of the streets in the Upper Broadway district. This enhancement is best accomplished by creating an overall unified appearance to the facades of buildings and to the street. The City can provide economic incentives and technical support for “facade improvement” and modify zoning to apply appropriate facade design standards to new constructions.

While facade improvements address the physical appearance of buildings fronting the street, simple landscaping measures will focus on the street. Re-paving along with the
introduction of decorative street lamps, benches and green space would further help to enhance the aesthetic quality of the streetscape.

The second aim is to develop additional residential units in the neighborhood. Encouraging single family and two-family housing (perhaps in the form of townhouses) on vacant lots and as replacements for vacant and critical buildings could serve a two-fold purpose. First, this would help to preserve the low-rise, medium density characteristics of the area. Second, this measure would encourage home ownership. Home ownership, because of its large financial investment, can lead to citizen participation in the upkeep and development of their community. The combination of aesthetic improvement and promotion of home ownership will rejuvenate and enhance Upper Broadway.

**Area 2**

The Waterfront target area comprises the Zappala and Rensselaer High School properties and seventeen parcels fronting Broadway between Fifth Avenue and Quakendary Creek. The Zappala property contains both a masonry block factory and a hardware store. Immediately north of Zappala is the combined Rensselaer Junior/Senior High School. The smaller parcels consist of City Hall and a very small park, five multi-family homes, a two-bay automobile garage, and a vacant eatery. For Rensselaer, this is a critical area.

The Waterfront target area constitutes approximately 40 acres, 2,000 feet of shoreline, and impressive views of Albany, all within a short walking distance of the train station. The existing land uses in this target area are inappropriate for such a valuable portion of Rensselaer.

The Waterfront target area offers two obstacles that inhibit redevelopment. The primary constraints are ownership fragmentation and the current activities associated with these parcels. Parcel acquisition and the procurement of new locations for tenants has to occur before development.

Rensselaer's zoning code is the second problem. Both Zappala and Rensselaer School properties are designated as R-3, Multi-Family Residential. However, the block factory predates the last zoning revision, thus permitting the factory operations. To allow for commercial uses, a variance is required.

**Proposals:**

This report proposes a new master plan for the Waterfront target area. The master plan will emphasize a mixed-use character for the site (Figure 10) that includes commercial enterprises, single and multi-family residential units and a hotel with conference facilities. Strict urban design standards are required to ensure development assimilates into the existing urban fabric in a cohesive manner. The standards should affirm a height maximum of five stories, so as to maintain the views from the residential neighborhoods of the City further east, and to preserve the City's urban character. Along Broadway, new homes should be situated with a minimal setback to create an effective street wall. The site will also support a ferry between Rensselaer and Albany.
Figure 10: This is an example of Amsterdam Canal Homes that offer commercial activities on the street level with apartments on the upper floors. This type of architectural style is suitable for the waterfront and can bolster Rensselaer’s strong Dutch heritage.

In conjunction with the development associated with the suggested master plan, alternative locations must be sought for Zappala, City Hall and the school property. Possible alternatives exist for Zappala and for City Hall, but currently there is no known alternate school site of comparable size within the City. The industrial district centered on the Port of Rensselaer can easily accommodate Zappala Block and Hardware. Owners of Zappala can benefit from the underutilized port facilities to expand their enterprises. With respect to City Hall, there is an existing proposal to relocate it to East Street, south of the former Herrick Street Bridge. In addition, please refer to the Train Station Study Area section, as there is a recommendation to create a new civic plaza incorporating City Hall, the Police Station and the City Library along East Street. A possibility for the School is for commercial developers to acquire some of the parking and sports areas in return for construction of a parking deck, development of alternate sports fields, financial contributions to improve the quality of education, and funding of a bus service to alternate sports fields.

Area 3
In a city that lacks communal space, Riverfront Park is an important resource. The park provides valuable open-space and river access. The park contains numerous murals painted by local children (Figure 11) and offers both active and passive recreational amenities. Residents enjoy the use of walkways, ballfields and lighted basketball and tennis courts. In the picnic area, a small kiosk describes the habits of a breeding pair of peregrine falcons that nest on a Dunn Memorial Bridge support. However, several
constraints reduce the effectiveness of Riverfront Park. The following section outlines these constraints and provides opportunities to enhance the park.

![Figure 11: An image of a mural painted by a child on a support for the Dunn Memorial Bridge.](image)

Physical peculiarities of the site constrain the physical expansion of Riverfront Park. First, Riverfront Park resides on land leased from the Department of Transportation. Second, various roadways crowd the park and in their present alignments, these roads prevent park expansion. Parkland consumes the Dunn Memorial Bridge right-of-way and the bridge awkwardly rises above the park. The bridge has eighteen columns that tower over the northern reaches of the park. Off-ramps fragment the central and southern fields. The on-ramp separates the park from the business district centered on Second Avenue. Broadway, a heavily traveled main thoroughfare forms the eastern boundary. For children who reside across from the park, Broadway is a hazard. Along the southern perimeter lies the access for Columbia Turnpike. A large volume of traffic uses the turnpike, as it is the main route to East Greenbush.

Riverfront Park also suffers from its proximity to Zappala Block. Just beyond Fifth Avenue, the Zappala property contains a factory to manufacture masonry block. The manufacturing process is noisy and releases dust particles into the air. An unsightly chain link fence surrounds the property. Piles of blocks and derelict equipment dominate the property. Finally, the block factory and the adjacent Zappala Hardware generate a significant volume of heavy truck traffic.

Two watercourses also influence the park. Foremost is the Hudson River. Riverfront Park lies within the Hudson’s hundred-year floodplain and this designation restricts the construction of new structures. The 315-mile long Hudson introduces a tidal cycle to the region. Nearby Troy experiences a 4.5-foot tide, the highest on the Hudson. The tidal
cycle creates an irregular shoreline; at low tide, a sandy apron emerges along the base of the armored bluff however; high tide sees water hard against the boulders. The second watercourse is Mill Creek. The channeled creek drains a pond across Broadway. The creek bisects the central portion of Riverfront Park as it empties into the Hudson forcing visitors to access either side of the park by transgressing along Broadway.

Riverfront Park is a popular community node and in its present form, adequately serves these purposes. However, minor design changes can dramatically improve Riverfront Park, to enhance the parkscape and river access. It should be noted that all modifications must comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) as the ADA ensures equality of ingress and accommodation to users of all physical capabilities.

**Proposals:**
The configuration of Riverfront Park reduces its usefulness as public open-space or in other words, the layout fails to take full advantage of the site. These recommendations offer a number of appearance and functionality improvements to the park (Figure 12).

![Figure 12: Concept sketch of proposed improvements to Riverside Park.](image)
First, we suggest simultaneous relocation of the gazebo and the Peoples Clock to the picnic area and expansion of the picnic space with additional benches and tables (Figures 13 and 14).

Figure 13: The photo on the left shows the gazebo in Riverfront Park. On the right is the Peoples Clock located between Broadway and the onramp to the Dunn Memorial Bridge. This report proposes moving both to the current picnic area within the park.

Figure 14: Concept sketch plan for the new sitting area in Riverfront Park. Please note the placement of the gazebo overlooks the Hudson River.
This will create a sorely needed focal point by offering visitors a relaxed, riverside sitting area (Figure 15). The second recommendation is for new plantings throughout the park. Strategically planted vegetation will minimize traffic noise and maximize open fields. Conifers along roadways are effective screens. Broad-leaf deciduous trees create landscape diversity and help to frame view corridors. Throughout the park, beds of perennials will add color. Note vegetation should consist of species native to the region. Finally, we advocate the addition of new sport fields. The gazebo relocation clears a rectangular space along the northern area of the park. The space could accommodate youth soccer or baseball fields. These sport fields will compliment the existing frequently utilized baseball field.

Riverfront Park Gazebo Overlooking Hudson River

Figure 15: Studio team member Brian Bender’s rendering of the new location and landscaping for the gazebo site.

Area 4
The Fort Crailo area consists of Riverside Street, Broadway to the intersection with Columbia Turnpike, and the Albany Yacht Club. It is the southernmost district of the waterfront study area and is isolated from the rest of the City by Columbia Turnpike. There is no safe or attractive way for a pedestrian or bicyclist to enter the target area. It is essential for the Rensselaer waterfront to be a cohesive system that increases access to the waterfront and offers an alternative connection to the remainder of the City.

Fort Crailo contains an excellent representation of historic architectural styles producing an enjoyable human scaled neighborhood. The target area presents itself as a unique district within the City of Rensselaer, offering numerous opportunities for preservation
and enhancement. The Fort Crailo target area offers the most potential in Rensselaer as a unique historic neighborhood, but it is not designated as a historic district. Consequently, it lacks the qualities generally associated with a historic neighborhood. It is essential that the entire district have a unifying theme that regulates types of streets, sidewalk paving material, signage placement and materials, architectural standards and streetlights. Further, it lacks a mechanism for enforcement and regulation for these types of guidelines.

Physical development constraints include several facilities in the Fort Crailo area. The Fort Crailo State Historic Site is one example. Fort Crailo is a permanent and important structure that anchors the neighborhood. It is essential that any future development is in context and is complimentary to this structure. The Petro-Chem Facility is another site located on the parcel just south of the Albany Yacht Club on Broadway. This property, although a physical constraint, presents an opportunity and will be discussed in a latter section. The Albany Yacht Club is the northernmost property in the Fort Crailo target area and represents an additional constraint. It is essential to the overall theme of the study area and plays an integral role in connecting Riverfront Park to Fort Crailo. Lastly, the City of Rensselaer Municipal Sewage Facility is located adjacent to the intersection of Riverside Street and Aiken Avenue. Its location detracts from the aesthetics and overall unique quality of the study area.

Aside from the landmark structures mentioned previously, the Fort Crailo target area contains an excellent assortment of residential structures in good condition and only a few are in poor condition. There are numerous opportunities for restoration. Finally, the waterfront parcels located on Riverside Street are in private ownership and currently used as overflow parking. These sites offer enormous potential for public use.

Proposals:
The Fort Crailo area has several unique attributes that, if planned correctly, can be enhanced and preserved to ensure a high quality environment. Therefore, physical redevelopment is not warranted.

Develop a Historic Overlay Zone: The Fort Crailo target area needs to be designated as a historic district by the City. This includes a special designation in the zoning ordinance that regulates development, renovations to existing structures, signage materials and colors, the placement and types of street trees. These regulations should incorporate design features such as pedestrian-scaled streetlights and create consistency in sidewalk paving material.

Study of Historic Buildings: There should be a study of the buildings in the area to establish whether placement on the National Register of Historic Places is warranted.

Develop a Revolving Loan Pool for Exterior Improvements: The Fort Crailo target area consists of low to moderate-income residents. Rensselaer needs to develop a revolving low- to no-interest loan pool that offers residents the opportunity and the means to renovate their homes. This will enhance the attractiveness of the neighborhood for new
homebuyers and retain existing residents. Further, it will instill a sense of pride in residents as they improve the quality of their environment.

**Public Park on the Waterfront:** The Fort Crailo target area lacks a public park on the waterfront. However, several private parcels, located on Riverside Street across from the Fort Crailo Historic Site, are undeveloped and underutilized. These private parcels should be acquired by the City and opened to the public as a passive use and cultural park. A park in this location will benefit Rensselaer in two ways. First, it will provide needed recreation space and will function as a place where people can access the Hudson River. Second, it will provide space for cultural events. Currently, the City lacks an outdoor venue for small events like a summer concert series, Shakespeare on the waterfront and/or heritage festivals. The park will act as an anchor for the neighborhood, especially with the inception of the proposed Rensselaer Riverwalk. Its development may also help to stimulate the City of Albany to make comparable improvements on the opposite side of the Hudson River.

**Extension of the Yacht Club Boat Slips Northward:** One of the greatest assets present in the Fort Crailo target area is the Albany Yacht Club. The Yacht Club facilities are unable to serve the growing number of transient boaters on the Hudson River. Therefore, the Yacht Club should be allowed to extend the number of slips it has northward to Riverfront Park. This will increase the number of visitors to Rensselaer during the boating season.

**Redevelopment of the Petro-Chem Pipe Manufacturing Site:** The Petro-Chem Pipe Manufacturing property, located next to the Albany Yacht Club, is underutilized in terms of waterfront usage. Further, it detracts from the historic quality of the Fort Crailo District. The property should be redeveloped as a bed and breakfast or an Inn due to its proximity to the Yacht Club and can be especially attractive to transient boaters. It will also provide needed overnight accommodations in the City of Rensselaer.
TRAIN STATION STUDY AREA

The train station project study area is that which immediately surrounds the Rensselaer Rail Station and the impending redevelopment project of the station. Broadway binds the area on the west, Partition Street on the north, East Street on the east and Third Avenue on the south. The area is dominated by the presence of the Amtrak station and its facilities, including the tracks that divide the City and the maintenance yard. The rumble of the train engines, the smell of diesel fuel and the voice of the person announcing the arriving/departing trains are commonplace elements. However, these elements are out of character in what is otherwise a residential section of the City with small town appeal. There is little commercial activity beyond the train station itself, and sidewalk life is most active during the times when the Junior/Senior high school is opening and closing.

The location of the Amtrak station forces this area to bear the impact of considerable commuter activity. The station has been identified as the ninth busiest station in the country (LDR International, Inc. 1999). According to the CDTA Generic Environmental Impact Statement (GEIS) completed in August 1998, the train station has a ridership of nearly 600,000 passengers per year. Direct access to the station via Partition Street alone has approximately 6,650 cars entering and leaving daily creating chronic parking problems.

In addition to the train commuter traffic entering the area, the Capital View Office Park complex draws almost 500 workers per day and that number will rise to approximately 1,000 when the construction of a fourth building is completed. The expansion and modernization of the Amtrak station coupled with the volume of commuters, for both the station and the office park, present a myriad of opportunities for this study area and revitalization possibilities for the community as a whole.

Goals and Objectives

The principal objective for the study area around the train station is to explore the range of possibilities and build upon the improvements and momentum generated by the rail station project. These areas include economic growth, housing, public amenities and visual and physical improvements to the streetscape.

The goals for the train station study area are:

- Relocate City Hall, the Police Station and the Library to create a civic plaza.
- Enhance the gateway entrances to the train station and proposed civic plaza.
- Establish a more balanced land use scheme that incorporates retail, office and residential uses.
- Infill vacant lots and improve facades to unify the street wall.
- Enhance the streetscapes to create a safer, friendlier pedestrian environment.
Existing Conditions

Broadway

Broadway is one of the principal thoroughfares of Rensselaer. Connecting to the Dunn Memorial Bridge, it is the major point of access to Albany, the Capital District and the interstate highway system. Providing the principal access to the rail station via Partition and East Streets, Broadway bears the brunt of commuter traffic, while also supporting substantial activity from the Junior/Senior High School, City Hall and Routes 9 and 20. The road is also burdened by trucks, particularly from the Zappala Block Factory at the Waterfront just west of Broadway and the gravel pit in the heart of the city. A notable problem of Broadway and other city streets is the visual intrusion of overhead power lines, scarring the streetscape and the rich view of downtown Albany.

The target portion of Broadway is essentially flat between the Dunn Memorial Bridge and the school access road, with traffic lights at bordering intersections. The southern sector is predominantly residential with a few mixed-use retail/apartment buildings that face Riverfront Park. The vista of downtown Albany is mostly obscured by the off ramp of the Dunn Memorial Bridge. In addition, this part of Broadway bridges Mill Creek, which empties into the Hudson River.

The northern portion between Herrick Street and Partition Street contains important city institutions: City Hall and the Police Station housed in the same building (Figure 16), the Junior/Senior high school and the Boys and Girls Club. City Hall and its grounds do not convey a sense of pride or civic importance. The surrounding sites do not help either. On the south side of City Hall stands a defunct one-story diner on a lot surrounded by gravel parking. On the north side, there is a small municipal park with a flagpole and a faded totem pole memorial. The Boys and Girls Club is located across the street and is surrounded by open land and dirt parking. Farther north on the west side of Broadway is the public school, which sits on a large parcel of land extending from Broadway to the waterfront. The immediate area sees significant student pedestrian and vehicular activity during the peak hours of school arrival, departure and lunch. The last segment of Broadway slopes up to the busy intersection at Partition Street, bridging the tracks leading to the Amtrak maintenance operations.
Figure 16: The Rensselaer City Hall and Police Station located on Broadway, near the Herrick Street intersection.

Partition Street
This portion of Partition Street is the short block between Broadway and East Street. At present, the street lacks character, serving as a connector road to the train station. The northern side of the street contains closed businesses, apartment buildings and an apparently renovated restaurant not yet in use (Figure 17). The southern side contains overgrown land belonging to Amtrak and a Stewart’s convenience store. The sole existing positive and readily exploitable feature is the excellent view of the Albany skyline.

Figure 17: Northern side of Partition Street.
**East Street**

East Street displays an extensive range of uses, including access to one of the busiest train stations in the country. Sloping down from Partition Street, the east side of East Street begins with some unattractive middle-to-low income housing. The western side of the street begins with the Stewart’s at the corner of Partition Street, followed by a parcel with thick, overgrown vegetation and a large paved area within the Amtrak parcel where a Price Chopper once stood. This paved area is now an extension of the surface parking for the train station. On the east side of the street, across from the entrance to the station are a few small businesses, dominated by the Eckerd Drugstore building. As the street slopes upward, the visual appeal and the neighborhood improve markedly. This particular portion, south of Eckerd’s, affords the best view of downtown Albany from East Street. Continuing all the way to the Third Avenue overpass, this latter two-thirds of the west side of East Street contains the best housing stock in this target area. This stretch is home to St. John’s Church (whose buildings house a range of community services), the E.F. Hart Hose No. 3 firehouse (Figure 18), a public basketball court and a small park with an unused fountain. Trees on the western side of the street hide the train station and tracks, as well as most of the view of Albany’s skyline.

![Figure 18: The historic E.F. Hart Firehouse located along East Street.](image)

**Third Avenue**

Partition and Third Avenue are the only currently-existing major streets connecting the neighborhoods to the west to those in the east and overcoming the physical barriers created by rail track. It also provides access to the Rensselaer Rail Station from the
growing residential area located near Exit 8 of I-90, as well as points north and south in Rensselaer County via Route 4. Elevated over the tracks, it descends down, joining the natural topography before meeting Broadway at the entrance ramp for the Dunn Memorial Bridge (Figure 19). Each side of the overpass has a unique character. At the eastern end stand some nice houses, but close proximity to a major thoroughfare detracts from their aesthetic value. Continuing toward the Hudson River, at the foot of the overpass lies the rubble of a recently razed factory within the property of what is now the Capital View Office Park and a small park with a war memorial. Across the street on the south side is a community center that occupies an old school building. Other parcels include a few empty lots and vacant buildings. Third Street provides opportunities for positive change.

Figure 19: The intersection of Third Avenue and Broadway. Note the extensive width of the street and the vacant building on the southern corner.
Land Use

A large portion of the study area consists of the Amtrak rail station, tracks and ancillary facilities. Table 15 shows the land use categories and the total number of acres devoted to such use:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Land Use</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Facility</td>
<td>1.32</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Use/Commercial</td>
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<td>0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal</td>
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<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office/Professional</td>
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<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Space</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking</td>
<td>13.71</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parks and Recreation</td>
<td>7.98</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
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<td>Residential - Multi Family</td>
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<td>5.44</td>
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<tr>
<td>Residential - Two Family</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
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<td>Transportation*</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacant</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>161.75</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 15: Summary of land use in the Train Station study area.

* It should be noted that the Transportation category includes one large parcel that extends south out of the study area and therefore misrepresents the total number of acres for the area. That rail parcel, along with others, contains the tracks and is not one that can or will be altered significantly.

Building Condition and Occupancy

The building condition observations noted 161 parcels of the 198 surveyed contain existing structures. The condition of the majority of structures (82.6%) is categorized as average (Table 16). Several, 11.8%, are in the poor category and the remainder, 5% and .6%, were excellent and critical, respectively.

Occupancy for each category of building condition has been calculated (Table 16). For the structures in average condition, the occupancy rate is 95.5%. Structures in poor condition maintain an occupancy rate of more than half (57.9%) and 100% of buildings in excellent condition are occupied. There are no occupants for buildings in the critical category.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bldg. Condition</th>
<th>Not Occupied</th>
<th>Occupied</th>
<th>Grand Total</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
<th>% Occupied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>82.6%</td>
<td>95.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
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<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>57.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Total</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>193</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 16: Summary data on building condition and occupancy for the Train Station study area.

**Scale of Buildings**

The scale of the buildings in the Train Station study area is characterized as low rise, with a majority (70.2%) of the buildings in the study area being two stories tall. The remainder of the buildings are split almost evenly between one story (14.3%) and three stories (15.5%).

**Current Projects**

**Rensselaer Rail Station Renovation Project**

The proposed project aims to build a larger and updated station; renovate track for high-speed train along the Albany/Rensselaer - New York City corridor; provide high level, covered boarding platforms to improve passenger access to trains; increase parking capacity; and expand commercial opportunities within the station. The total cost of the project is an estimated $43 million, which includes a new station, boarding facilities and parking garage, track and site renovation, the construction of the new Herrick Street Bridge and engineering/administration facilities. Construction began in July of 1999 and estimated completion is in the spring of 2001.

**New Station Building**

The new station building will be approximately 80,000 square feet, replacing the existing 20,000 square foot facility, which will be razed upon completion of the new one. It will be built just south of the new Herrick Street Bridge and the existing building. Beyond the functional elements of ticketing, baggage and waiting areas, the new facility will include 10,000 square feet of available retail and office space and meeting facilities. It will be encompass four floors, with the concourse level at the same level as East Street and the new Herrick Street Bridge (Figure 20).

*Concourse Level.* As the entrance level into the new station from East Street and Broadway, it connects to the top level of the parking garage and to the track platform under complete cover of new canopy. Proposals for the concourse include the ticket counter, eateries, a bank, retail, a relocated post office and a waiting area.
Mid Level. The same level as the second floor of the parking garage. Amtrak offices will be located here, with the remainder to serve as meeting space.

Mezzanine. This level is dedicated to retail space and circulation area. There will be no direct access to the parking garage from this level.

Track Level. At the same elevation as the railroad, plans include the provision of employee lockers, storage, a loading area, and access for buses and mechanical rooms.

![Image](image_url)

Figure 20: Artist’s rendering of the completed Amtrak Station renovation project as it would be viewed looking east (courtesy of CDTA, 1999).

Parking Garage
The three-deck garage will support 650 cars supplemented by 450 spaces of uncovered surface parking. The top deck will be at the same level as the new Herrick Street Bridge and East Street and will also be the area designated for passenger drop off and pick up. The main purpose of the second floor is to provide parking for Amtrak personnel and a reserve parking area for meetings and small conferences. The first floor is dedicated to passenger parking; bus activity and service access for maintenance. The area north and south of the parking garage will be landscaped and connected to the linear open space along the western side of East Street.

New Herrick Street Bridge
The new Herrick Street Bridge will be built to replace the dilapidated bridge demolished in 1998. An important element of the train station development, the new bridge will provide direct motor vehicle and pedestrian access from Broadway, improving rail access and traffic flow and re-establishing linkage between neighborhoods. Access to the new bridge will begin its grade just beyond where the existing Herrick Street leaves Broadway, terminating Washington Street at this point in the process. The bridge will curve slightly to the north before it crosses the tracks, continue at the concourse level of the new station and parking building and merge onto East Street north of the previous alignment between the existing Herrick and Wendell Streets. Construction is to begin in the fall of 1999 and the estimated completion is in the spring/summer of 2001.
Capital View Office Park
There are currently three buildings in the office park, with approximately 450 state office employees in two buildings for the New York State Office of Children and Family Services and the New York State Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence. A three-story office building is proposed for erection behind the present buildings that will support an additional 450 state employees. To accommodate this influx, additional parking is being planned at Green Street and Third Avenue and adjacent to the Boys and Girls Club on Broadway on the south side of the building. In addition, the building at the southwest corner (intersection of Washington Street and Third Avenue) will contain a day care center and an architects’ office. Demolition began in May of 1999, and the anticipated completion is June of 2000.

Opportunities
The most significant force in this study area is the train station itself. The physical location of the station and the alignment of the tracks create a permanent division between the northeast neighborhoods from those in southwest portions of the City. Bridges are built at the automobile scale and offer fewpleasanties for pedestrians. In addition, the lack of a buffer between the rail parcels and the surrounding areas provides a constant visual and audible reminder of this active transportation corridor.

There are four areas of opportunity located within the train station study area and depicted in Map 6. These areas have been judged to possess the greatest potential for change that will benefit the City both visually and economically. Each area is an access route to the train station and plays an important role in defining the character of the City of Rensselaer.

Area 5
Area 5 is located north of the current train station entrance, extends north along both sides of East Street and then heads west to include the entire block from Partition Street to Broadway. This area encompasses approximately ten acres of land, including the large overgrown lot that borders both East Street and Partition Street. There is poor to average quality housing stock, vacant buildings and several parcels of parking which are detracting from the continuous urban fabric that is found along most of the east side of East Street. Stewart’s and Eckerd’s have deep setbacks and parking lots that front the street and detract from the visual quality of the urban fabric.

Along with Broadway, East Street is Rensselaer’s principal thoroughfare. It is perhaps the city’s most pleasant street with the highest valued housing stock in the city’s central areas. Along this road, you can find St. John’s Church with its majestic steeple, the historic firehouse, plenty of green, trees, sidewalk, a park, and occasional outstanding view of the Albany skyline. For rail commuters from the surrounding Capital District, it is also effectively a gateway to the station and to the community.
Proposals:

East Street, north of the existing rail station entrance - The rail station development project comes during a period of increasing ridership, which is projected to increase in the coming decades. This increase, together with the expansion of commercial endeavors within the new station complex, will create significant economic opportunities in the immediate surrounding area. With proper forethought and strategic development, the potential is there to develop a core community with small businesses; food and/or entertainment and attractive housing, all anchored by the rail station development project.

Providence, Rhode Island embarked upon a similar task of downtown revitalization that sought to not only restore its business district, but also included the surrounding neighborhoods. The planning process included a comprehensive plan for general citywide policies, specific plans addressed various citywide issues and area plans targeted specific neighborhoods. (Blue Ribbon Practices in Community Development, 1998) Although the effort produced many significant accomplishments, most notable as a comparison to this area of East Street was the construction a new railroad station. This project involved the rehabilitation of the former station, which has received National Landmark status, into offices and a restaurant, and the development of other parcels into office and residential space. The importance of this example is the type of land uses that were viewed as complementary to the rail station project. The recommendations that follow apply a similar approach.

Just north of the entrance is an ideal location for further commercial development. A row of two-story buildings consisting of commercial mixed-use would help stimulate an effort to entice commuters to linger and revitalize community amenities for the surrounding neighborhoods. The volume increase generated by the rail station project and accompanying community development efforts make the potential for small office, retail and eateries on the ground floor with office or apartments above self-evident. The buildings should reflect the architectural style of the region at the dawn of the 20th century, and should be erected up to the lot line with parking around back. Auto access would be located at the northern end of the row of buildings.

The area across from this northern entrance to the rail station offers the same entrepreneurial opportunities described above. The Eckerd’s lot and following several lots to the south appear as a conspicuous gap in the streetscape. This represents potential for more two-story commercial mixed-use buildings as described in the previous paragraph. While recognizing the community benefit of a centrally located pharmacy, the Eckerd’s building is incongruous with the neighborhood fabric and monopolizes a strategic commercial location with an excellent view of downtown Albany. The community would be better served by encouraging a pharmacy to locate in a proposed mixed-use building or perhaps the rail station. These parcels would then be available for the type of commercial development that would prosper by the stimulus of the rail station project.

Continuing north along the west side of East Street, up to the Stewart’s parcel, offers the opportunity to further develop a thriving residential neighborhood by adding two-story duplexes to counterbalance the housing on the opposite side of the street. This type of
development will provide continuity of the street wall to a developing neighborhood and community. Buildings would be built close to the street at the lot line, with parking around back. Auto access could be provided at the point north of the residential buildings.

Finally, the housing on the east side of East Street from Partition Street south to the proposed mixed use needs some attention. The quality and standard should be raised to complement both the proposed residential developments on the west side and the existing homes south of Wendell Street. One option would be basic facade improvements aided by funding from the HOME program where applicable (twelve of the nineteen buildings on the block are owner-occupied). Another long-term option would be to encourage, by way of incentives, the purchase of selected structures for removal and replacement. This sector of East Street, both sides from Wendell Street to Partition Street, presents a significant opportunity to produce a vital, thriving neighborhood replete with commercial and entertainment amenities, transportation and housing.

**Partition Street** — Both sides of Partition present an opportunity for mixed-use development. For this area, it is suggested that low rise, three- to four-story buildings offering retail space on the ground floor and office space above be encouraged. Promoting office space in the City of Rensselaer offers a clear and distinct advantage. The Amtrak station provides an easy transportation link to New York City. Rensselaer should capitalize on the location of the station and offer competitive office space rates to businesses that engage in travel between New York and Albany. The resurgence of downtown Albany gives Rensselaer a considerable competitive advantage in terms of cheaper land, office rentals and parking, as well as easy access to the train.

Retail space would support residents, office workers and commuters in the area. Opportunities for retail should include restaurants, cafes, bookstore and other specialty shops that can compete with stores and services offered in larger malls.

The corner of Partition Street and Broadway is a unique location that offers outstanding views of Albany. Figure 18 is an example of a project in Yonkers, New York that could be well suited for this location and would define that corner as a significant landmark in the City. The building depicted below is only one in a series of projects currently pursued by the Office of Downtown and Waterfront Redevelopment for the City of Yonkers. The growing list of projects serving to revitalize the downtown Hudson River waterfront area of the City has received more than $80 million in public funds and range in scope from streetscape improvements to the redevelopment of a 22-acre brownfields site.
Figure 18: The project pictured above consists of a 40,000 square feet of retail and office space fronting Main Street in Yonkers, New York with a 600 space parking garage in the rear. Designed by architect Robert A.M. Stern, construction was scheduled to begin in July of 1999.

Area 6

Area 6 is located along East Street, south of the former Herrick Street Bridge connection. This area is currently a narrow stretch of green space with a dilapidated basketball court. The area also includes a small portion of a large parcel owned by Amtrak immediately east of this narrow strip.

Proposals:

This area offers a major development opportunity to create a civic presence in the center of the city. Currently City Hall is housed in an outdated building that fails to convey the importance of its civic functions, while the library is found in a small building north of Partition Street along Broadway. Lacking a well-defined area of public uses and civic buildings, we suggest consolidating city functions in a public/private partnership.

A new civic plaza is proposed to be located in Area 6 along East Street. The plaza would include a new City Hall and Library buildings placed at highly visible focal points and a small recreation park (Figure 19). The civic plaza buildings are proposed for a parcel of land approximately four and a half acres in size. It is suggested that this project be developed as a multi-story southern anchor to the station development project. The City Hall building is proposed with a gross floor area of 57,600 square feet to accommodate all its current functions and 28,800 square feet of rentable retail/office space. The Library is proposed with a gross floor area of 10,800 square feet. This would double the current size of the library and allow for 1,680 square feet for rentable retail/office space. The
project is envisioned as a private sector initiative with joint financial participation by the City government in capital financing as well as maximizing all available tax incentives. The figure below is a conceptual plan for the proposed Civic Plaza.

![Figure 19: A concept plan for the Civic Plaza on East Street.](image)

A project on affordable housing in City of Redwood City, California was selected as a HUD Blue Ribbon Practice for its achievement of creating an "urban village where the energy of commerce and culture and the vitality of a residential community come together on a human scale." (Blue Ribbon Practices in Community Development, 1998) This example is presented because a centerpiece of the project was the construction of a new city hall and public plaza adjacent to the award-winning proposed mixed-use development. The City recognized the need to highlight the importance of civic functions performed by City Hall as an integral part of their downtown revitalization efforts.

The east side of East Street in Area 6 is mainly residential with a few businesses scattered among the homes. An alternative proposal for this area is to develop housing while promoting home ownership with rental opportunities. Building setbacks should be minimal and parking should accommodate one car per unit. Designs should promote parking in the rear of the buildings.

**Area 7**

Area 7 stretches the entire length of the east side of Broadway from Third Avenue to the train tracks overpass. In this portion of area 7, there are several vacant lots and older housing stock. The area also includes a segment of Washington Avenue from Fourth
Avenue to Herrick Street. In this portion, there are several vacant buildings and homes in poor condition. There are roughly five and a half acres in this area.

**Proposals:**

**Broadway's east side, north of Herrick Street** - A major element of the rail station development plan is the construction of the new Herrick Street Bridge. Re-establishing primary access to the rail station for auto, bus and pedestrian, the bridge provides an invaluable link to neighborhoods on both sides of the rail station property. With the redeveloped rail station as an anchor to help create a downtown district with a unified civic and commercial area, this portion of Broadway at the mouth of Herrick Street offers significant opportunities. Furthermore, with the expansion of the Capital View Office Park, the need to accommodate 450 more workers has led to a plan providing surface parking on the northern corner of Herrick Street. Such location and associated increase of traffic volume would further impel the desired move of the Boys and Girls Club of Southern Rensselaer County to an alternative site that would provide grounds for outdoor activities and/or a swimming pool.

If the Boys and Girls Club can be relocated to an attractive alternative, this portion of Broadway from Herrick Street north to the overpass would become available for residential development. This type of development would retain the residential character of Broadway currently exhibited north and south of this area. With potential development of the Rensselaer waterfront, Broadway becomes prime residential real estate. The opportunity presents itself to engender a desirable neighborhood with distinction and character through location and access, historic architecture, streetscape improvements, recreation and an overall improved walkable community.

North of Herrick Street would thus be a prime location for a row of two or three story townhouses. Buildings should be reflective of Rensselaer's historic turn-of-the-century architecture built up to the lot line, with parking in the back and auto access at the northern end. Parking for the Capital View Office Park would be located behind the proposed townhouses and concealed from sight, extending east to the fence at the tracks and north as far as necessary. An alternative would be deck parking at this locale adjacent to the ramp and the fence at the tracks.

**Washington Street from Herrick Street to Fourth** - This area offers several opportunities for infill housing on vacant lots, a vacant building and other structures in states of disrepair. This new housing should be consistent with the current homes that are in good condition. The street presently has an effective tree canopy and planting strip. These landscaping elements should be incorporated into new housing (Figure 20) to appeal to those seeking the convenience of living near the train station, waterfront and downtown Albany.
Figure 20: The photo on the left is Washington Avenue looking towards Fourth Avenue. The drawing on the right (Calthorpe 1993, p. 101) provides a vision of how the street can look with streetscape improvement and minimal building setbacks.

**Broadway, south of Herrick Street** - This area is the first seen by motorists entering Rensselaer via the Dunn Memorial Bridge and should become a special district representative of a gateway to the City. First, facade improvements on existing housing stock should be instituted, as several structures qualify for HOME funding. Second, edification of residential buildings should be encouraged through incentives on currently vacant lots. Finally, streetscape improvements such as historic-style lampposts, grass, flowers and trees planted in planting strips; removal of visually oppressive wires and poles could be made to enhance the aesthetic quality of this important gateway to Rensselaer.

**Area 8**
This area is a segment of Third Avenue from Broadway to the overpass. High priority is given to the corner of Third Avenue and Broadway where two vacant and unattractive buildings are located. In addition, on the south side of Third Avenue there is another vacant structure, as well as proposed surface parking on a vacant lot for the Capital View Office Park. The area consists of slightly more than two acres.

**Proposals:**
**Broadway and Third Avenue** – This is an important and heavily traveled corner, as it functions as a gateway to Albany via the Dunn Memorial Bridge. Currently there are two vacant, unattractive and incongruous buildings comprising this corner. We recommend a two or three story building of either office or mixed-use office/retail of attractive historical architectural design (Figure 21). Furthermore, alongside the redevelopment and expansion of Capital View Office Park, streetscape improvements should be made and landscaping elements installed from Broadway to Adams Street. This will help unify all improvement efforts within this rail station area into a pleasant, positive, growing neighborhood, with a distinct character and identity.
Figure 21: This rendering of the historic Gazette building on Main Street in Yonkers, New York provides an example of historic architecture that is well suited for this area. This building is the first to be fully restored in a series of downtown waterfront redevelopment projects (City of Yonkers, 1999).

Green Street and Third Avenue - The vacant building on this corner parcel (Figure 22) should be replaced with a two to three story mixed-use building. This location, because of its close proximity to the Office Park, could support perhaps an eatery and/or a variety of stores to accommodate the projected 900 state employees.

Figure 22: Vacant structure located on the corner of Third Avenue and Green Street.
DOWNTOWN STUDY AREA

The Downtown study area includes the lower section of Broadway (between Third Avenue and Columbia Turnpike) and the lands east to South Street. The appearance of the downtown clearly reveals a general state of deterioration. Although the streets appear relatively clean, there are many homes in states of disrepair along with vacant buildings. There are also a significant number of properties for sale. The area has many signs that point to a significant incidence of absentee landlords. In many cases, the condition of the property and the homes suggest maintenance is needed. Examples include lawns in need of cutting or seeding, houses in need of painting and repair and driveway pavement in need of replacement. Despite these outward signs of decay, some locations have a commanding view of the Hudson River and the Albany skyline.

Historically, the public has thought of “downtown Rensselaer” as primarily the northern section of this project area (Third Avenue to Aiken Avenue). As the city has expanded, there has been little formalized planning in the downtown area. This lack of planning has resulted in a haphazard conglomeration of land uses. Rather than working together as a whole, each land use acts independently of those that surround it, giving the lower Broadway district a fractured character with a downtown that works against itself. The overall vision is to create a lively, unified downtown area for Rensselaer.

Goals and Objectives

The heart of the city of Rensselaer is the downtown area. Despite the decay and dilapidation of existing structures, downtown Rensselaer has the potential to become the pulse of this riverside city. The main goal for the downtown study area is to develop it into a pleasant, upper-scale city sector where residents can live, work and play in a clean, vibrant, well-populated city with a viable central business district.

In order to fulfill the goal of attracting residents of an upper level income to the downtown, the creation of a business district becomes an important focus. The objectives for the area are defined as follows:

- Incorporate more mixed-use development.
- Improve aesthetics of existing structures and streetscapes.
- Infill vacant lots and replace existing critical structures with low-rise housing.
- Promote large-scale commercial development along Columbia Turnpike.

Existing Conditions

There are 152 parcels in the study area, which were surveyed. Results of the survey are described in the following sections.
Land Use

The downtown study area contains several types of land uses with commercial ranked as the predominant category at 34.2%. Table 17 indicates the type of land use, number of parcels and percentage of the total parcels in that category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Land Use</th>
<th>Number of Parcels</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>34.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>29.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacant</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Facilities</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed use</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 17: Land use by category for the Downtown study area.

Additional analysis revealed that 22.7% (10 parcels) of the residential parcels are single family, and the remaining 77.3% (34 parcels) are two-family. There are no multi-family units in the downtown district. Public facilities parcels consist of one community center, four churches, one gas station and one bank. There is a historic/landmark structure, a Methodist Church circa 1853, in serious need of repair. Also noteworthy is a large building along Green Street whose construction seems to have halted before completion. A sign on the building advertises 5,000 square feet of space to be leased.

Parcel Condition and Owner/Renter Status

This overall parcel condition rating includes the condition of any structures on the parcel. Of these parcels, 37.5% (57 parcels) are in excellent condition, 32.9% (50 parcels) are average and 29.6% (45 parcels) are in critical condition.

Field observations noted that residential parcels are 77.3% (34 parcels) occupied by renters while 22.7% (10 parcels) are owner-occupied.

Opportunities

In this predominantly commercial area, 29.6% of the buildings are in critical condition. Several large vacant buildings are located in the study area. Repairing and reusing some of these larger buildings could give them new life as commercial or residential space (Figure 23). Given the considerable amount of underutilized land, there is great development potential to transform the area into a vibrant downtown business district without displacing existing residents and businesses. New developments could include office space, restaurants, commercial shopping districts and even some alternative housing options (such as senior citizen housing).
Figure 23: The above photos are of a vacant building on Greene Street. Photo enhancements show how renovations can dramatically improve the appearance of this underutilized structure.

In order to accomplish the vision of downtown Rensselaer as proposed it is necessary to take a three-fold approach. First, we expand the definition of Rensselaer’s downtown to include the lands from Aiken Avenue to the southern boundary of Fort Crailo. This area is believed to possess great potential due to its historic character and easy access to the central business district. Secondly, we recommend that downtown Rensselaer strengthens its historical roots. This could be accomplished by using Dutch architectural elements and Dutch names in the area. Consequently, the whole downtown would have a historical edge to help define both its character and uniqueness. Finally, we propose creating three distinct target areas in the downtown study area, each with its own specific land use concentration. Area 9 would be mixed use, area 10 would be multi-family residential, and area 11 would be commercial. The aim of this proposal is to avoid overlapping and competing focuses resulting in a coherent downtown district that would provide a diversified focus for the City and surrounding areas.

Area 9
Area 9 is the area within the border of Columbia Turnpike, Third Avenue and Green Street. Currently, there are a small number of mixed-use buildings concentrated in this location. Unfortunately, many of these buildings are in poor condition and are being used ineffectively.

Proposals:
The primary benefit of a mixed-use area is that residential and commercial units can coexist in close proximity and benefit from each other. In order for mixed use to work effectively, Rensselaer first needs to amend its zoning regulations to permit new construction of mixed-use development. Furthermore, Rensselaer needs to repair its existing mixed-use buildings in order to improve their appearance and promote their usefulness in an urban environment (Figure 24).
Figure 24: This building is located on the corner of Broadway and Second Avenue. The photo on the right has some aesthetic enhancements designed to improve the overall character of the building and the neighborhood.

Area 10
Third Avenue, Aiken Avenue, South Street and Walker Street border this area. A majority of the two-family rental housing buildings in the downtown are concentrated here.

Proposals:
This area offers a strong potential for low-rise apartment buildings (Figure 25) that could replace the critical and vacant two-family units. The creation of these apartment buildings would help to create more opportunities for living space (leading to an increased density) and would lead to a more effective use of the land currently occupied by residential units.
Figure 25: Example of a low-rise apartment building.

One particular opportunity Rensselaer has is to build apartment buildings in conjunction with its waterfront development. A possibility Rensselaer might want to explore, for example, is the development of an apartment building where each owner is guaranteed a boat slip at the Yacht Club.

**Area 11**

Area 11 encompasses the lands within Aiken Avenue, Belmore Place, South Street and Bridge Avenue. The major opportunity for the downtown section is commercial development. Many people desire a shopping district to both serve residents and attract visitors and income to the city. The location with perhaps the most significant potential is on Columbia Turnpike. The combined acreage of adjacent vacant lands is 6.85 acres or 298,386 square feet (Figure 26).
Figure 26: Commercial opportunity area on Columbia Avenue.

Proposals:
This report proposes the creation of a shopping district (perhaps a Dutch-theme plaza to incorporate Rensselaer’s rich historical element). Area 11 has the highest potential for successful commercial development due to the visibility afforded by Columbia Turnpike and the capacity to attract shoppers from East Greenbush and more distant locations. Furthermore; there are many opportunities for construction in this area due to the large amount of vacant land and buildings.

There are a wide variety of commercial opportunities. One option involves the development of a multi-screen movie theatre (Figure 27). Many residents commented that Rensselaer youth have no place to go for entertainment in the area. A movie theatre would provide entertainment for people of all ages, and act as a magnet to the City and downtown. An independent movie theatre (similar to the Spectrum or the Madison in Albany) requires between 9,000 and 29,000 square feet and could easily be located here.

Figure 27: This is an enhanced photo simulation showing a proposed movie theatre on the vacant Columbia Turnpike parcel.
A second possibility for this location is the construction of a supermarket (Figure 28). This possibility is based on the strong public concern for a grocery store to be established in the study area. Existing facilities for grocery shopping include several convenience stores and a few large-scale stores in neighboring towns. However, convenience stores do not adequately serve the needs of the area and the larger stores are difficult to get to for most of the population who do not have cars. A supermarket requires anywhere between 6,000 and 45,000 square feet.

Figure 28: An alternative for the vacant parcel on Columbia Turnpike is a supermarket.

Since neither possibility requires the full acreage that is available, there is the potential to incorporate one or both of these possibilities and perhaps others into an outdoor commercial plaza (similar to Westgate Plaza in Albany).
Each street within the Central Areas of the City of Rensselaer possesses its own unique character. Parallel to the redevelopment of the Amtrak Station, the expansion of Capital View Office Park and the variety of proposals detailed in this document, an important urban design element that remains to be addressed is the overall streetscape. The streetscape influences the quality of life in the community and the image projected to visitors. Funding for such infrastructure improvements is currently available and should be a short-term priority in the enhancement as well as creation of an attractive street environment.

Sidewalks should be available on both sides of each street as a safety and functional measure. They should be at least 5 feet wide and constructed of a durable, all-weather surface with appropriate access for the disabled. Absent at many important locations, safe, convenient, clearly marked crosswalks must be provided.

Beyond the explicit benefits provided by sidewalks, planting strips serve an important role as well. Beyond their aesthetic function in beautifying the environment and improving the sense of place, they serve as an important buffer for residents, pedestrians, shoppers between the building and sidewalk area and the street with its traffic and parked cars. Although found through much of the target area, most of the planting strips are unused and barren. They should be populated with appropriate trees, shrubbery, flowers and grass or brick. Trees should be native to the region and appropriate for their practical purpose of providing shade and canopy beyond their aesthetic quality.

Street and pavement signage must be uniform and consistent to command the respect of the public and provide safety to users. Rensselaer currently lacks appropriate signage. The city should adopt better signage and must be warranted by use and need. An overabundance of signage however, could have adverse effects. The attention of drivers and pedestrians should be on the road and other users, not on a multitude of signs. “Oversigning degrades the usefulness of signs, causes distractions, creates a cluttered effect, is ineffective and wastes resources” (Oregon DOT, 1995, p.143). Rensselaer should address the issue of signage improvement and investigate alternatives in this area. Lastly, the City should develop a plan of action to force Niagara Mohawk into removing its overhead power lines. These power lines are an eyesore and definitely detract from the City’s livable qualities and possible future enhancements.

**Columbia Turnpike as a Boulevard**

The major arterial in the Central Areas is Columbia Turnpike. This roadway is an overpowering presence, out of scale with the surrounding areas. It separates essential areas of the City and communicates through its traffic and design that moving out-of-town traffic swiftly through the City is more important than the needs of local residents. We propose that most of Columbia Turnpike in the City of Rensselaer should be
remodelled as a four-lane urban boulevard with a planted median. A boulevard is much easier for pedestrians to cross than a conventional arterial highway because there is a protected area in the middle. Its planted median beautifies the City, and the elegance of a boulevard communicates very effectively to motorists the special character of the place. Given the magnificent view of the Albany skyline available to motorists as they drive north-westwards along Columbia Turnpike through Rensselaer, the creation of a boulevard would make an extraordinary improvement both to the City and the Region. Support should be available from the City of Albany the State Government, and corporations and religious denominations whose buildings are prominent features of the Albany skyline.

New York State Department of Transportation has created boulevards in such cities as Newburgh and Saratoga Springs, and many DOT engineers are familiar with the New York States's historic boulevards and urban parkways in New York City, Buffalo and other urban areas. A Columbia Turnpike Boulevard would reinforce and dignify the Downtown, Fort Crailo and Waterfront areas, supporting the City of Rensselaer's historic character. It would help to calm through traffic, and to encourage shopping and dining stops in Rensselaer by motorists passing through the City.
Comprehensive Planning Process

The comprehensive planning process is a means of creating a futuristic vision through an acceptable methodology. The process includes preliminary research, identification and review of alternatives and constraints, development of an action plan, and implementation. Frequently, the process does not end after implementation, as the solution often requires monitoring and adjustment to produce the required effect (Cullingworth 1997, 6). A comprehensive plan is a product of this process and forms a basis of contemporary urban planning that maps the future of a community. The plan encompasses an extended period of time that usually spans 10 to 20 years with updates at 3 to 5 year intervals. Comprehensive plans include a community profile, summary of current conditions, problem diagnosis, and recommendations. Often plans contain specialized sections that discuss important themes such as transportation, economy, and housing.

To manage future growth wisely, a comprehensive plan performs several important functions. The plan regulates the usage and conservation of social, cultural, and natural resources. It acts as a guide for public budget policies and administers the timely installation of public infrastructure and facilities. Finally, the plan helps a community to formulate its zoning and subdivision ordinances (Daniels et al. 1995, 11-12). These ordinances are critical in the success of a comprehensive plan. Zoning and subdivision ordinances enforce the vision outlined in the comprehensive plan, and it is crucial that synchronization between comprehensive plan and land use ordinances is established.

Currently, Rensselaer does not have a citywide comprehensive plan. It has three rather dated waterfront plans, with some degree of continuity and municipal approval:


2. *City of Rensselaer: A Local Coastal Management Case Study* (New York State Department of State Coastal Management 1979).


All three plans concentrate on the City Boat Launch Area, parcels between Quakendary and Mill Creeks, and the Fort Crailo neighborhood. These unimplemented plans identify riverfront access, a waterfront trail, and historic preservation as critical elements for Rensselaer. Each of these strategies is reiterated in the current document, so that there is long-term continuity in riverfront strategy since 1976. Nevertheless, it is vital that the City of Rensselaer prepares and approves a Comprehensive Plan for the whole urban area, incorporating the riverfront strategy and setting the ground rules for the revitalization of the remainder of the city. The goal of this document is to highlight the need for a comprehensive plan and stimulate the planning process.
Zoning Ordinance for the City of Rensselaer

After identifying opportunities for the study area, the Studio team examined the City’s Zoning Ordinance adopted in 1979. The ordinance empowers the City to promote and protect the public health, safety, and general welfare of its citizens. The ordinance regulates the location, construction, alteration, occupancy and use of buildings and structures, and manages land use. Since 1979, the ordinance has undergone no significant revisions except for a 1991 redrawing of the zoning map (Figure 28). The ordinance divides Rensselaer into twelve zoning districts (Table 18).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>R1 Single-family Residential</th>
<th>R2 Two-family Residential</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R3 Multiple-family Residential</td>
<td>HR Historic Residential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LB Local Business</td>
<td>LB2 Local Business 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CI Commercial Industrial</td>
<td>HC Historic Commercial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Heavy Industrial</td>
<td>LC Land Conservation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FW Floodway</td>
<td>PD Planned Development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 18: The City of Rensselaer’s zoning districts as defined in the Zoning Ordinance.

The ordinance also contains regulations for overlay districts (Table 19). These regulations are required in addition to the specific district(s) that lie in the overlay zone.

| FF Floodway Fringe | CST Columbia Street |

Table 19: The City of Rensselaer’s overlay districts.

Future Land Uses and Required Zoning Changes

Healthy and vibrant neighborhoods are essential for Rensselaer. To help nurture these neighborhoods, the Studio Team strongly recommends the expansion of mixed land uses. Sucher (1995) emphasizes the importance of mixed land uses as an ingredient for successful neighborhoods. He calls these types of neighborhoods urban villages and identifies several characteristics. First, they have pedestrian friendly streetscapes set at a human scale with wide sidewalks and decorative plantings. Second, they have residences adjacent to, or above, commercial enterprises. Third, the neighborhoods are composed of families, couples, and singles. Finally, they often support an assortment of commercial properties. Examples include bakeries, eateries, retail shops, banks, professional practices, and markets. These businesses service local residents as well as attract visitors to the neighborhood. It is the crowds that help to diversify, vitalize, and stabilize neighborhoods.

The compactness of Rensselaer is ideally suited for the urban village concept. Many of these new uses can be complementary to the City’s history and waterfront. The Studio team selected three optimal areas: the downtown business district, the area along Broadway south of the Rensselaer High School, and on Partition Street and East Street adjacent to the new station. Currently, these areas are zoned Local Business, Multiple-
family Residential and Two-family Residential. However, to promote mixed-uses in these areas, a zone adjustment is necessary.

The City’s current zoning ordinance permits a mixture of land uses in the Historic Residential and Historic Commercial zones. These zones allow single and multi-family units in combination with professional offices, personal services, and specialty shops. This report suggests an merger of the Historic Residential and Commercial categories to take advantage of this zoning flexibility, and an extension of their coverage to some areas of the downtown, as well as along Broadway, and along Partition and East Streets in the vicinity of the train station. This new zone will combine residences with businesses to form urban villages.

**Geographic Information Systems**

Geographic Information Systems (GIS) is an assemblage of computer hardware, software and spatial data designed to efficiently input, store, analyze, update and display geographically referenced information (Star and Estes 1990, 2-3). Geographic Information Systems are now common in many regional and urban planning applications. Harris and Elmes (1993, 9) attribute the acceptance to increasing computer awareness, lower costs and the availability of PC-based GIS software and data.

Planners have exploited the productiveness of GIS to facilitate their varied tasks. Planners utilize this tool to inventory conditions of parcels, structures and streets. It also permits planning officials to efficiently produce a wide assortment of maps. Real world applications of GIS include the ability to quickly locate and plot right-of-ways and public utilities. Using census information, planners can trace demographic trends. Finally, planners can analyze various natural, transportation and infrastructure systems of a community.

GIS made a significant contribution to the Rensselaer Studio. It made difficult and complex spatial analysis possible and without this technology, these analyses would have been labor intensive, costly and impracticable. The Studio used Environmental Systems Research Institute’s (ESRI) ArcView© version 3.1, a widely employed, user friendly PC-based software package. ArcView©, and its main rival MapInfo Professional©, offer users three critical functions: database management, spatial analysis and cartographic output. These functions make ArcView© or MapInfo Professional© ideally suited for municipal planning projects.

For the study area, a GIS library was developed. The library is a digital database consisting of data sets collected from numerous site visits. Importantly, the database links tax records with parcel identifiers, making it possible to map at the parcel level. Currently, the library has land use, building type and parcel condition stored as shapefiles, which are the native spatial data format of this software. It is important to note that ArcView’s© has ability to support other GIS formats. These formats include ArcInfo© coverages, MapInfo© tables, CAD drawings and aerial images. This flexibility allows the Rensselaer GIS library to incorporate a myriad of data sets. Potential sources include governmental agencies, non-profit organizations and universities.
This report recommends the City acquire the latest version of ArcView© or MapInfo© to aid the planning process. Transformations of data from ArcView to MapInfo format are not difficult, though it is advisable to stay in one format as much as possible. Presently, the City has no computerized mapping system and this inadequacy hinders the City's capacity to make informed decisions. The installation of ArcView© or MapInfo© will provide the City with an effective tool for planning. To support installation, computer hardware is necessary. The Studio team suggests the following hardware: an IBM compatible unit with a minimum of 128 MB of RAM and a 20 GB Hard Drive with a Zip Drive; a monitor of 17 inches or larger; a simple color printer to render cartographic outputs; a scanner; and a high-speed Internet link. Once operational, the City will be able to use to the GIS library created by the Studio team.
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