

20/20 VISION  
VILLAGE OF WILLIAMSVILLE COMMUNITY PLAN  
COMMUNITY PLAN COMMITTEE

MEETING NOTES – SEPTEMBER 7, 2006

The meeting started at 5:30 PM.

George Grasser and Partners for a Livable Western New York attended the meeting to conduct a walk of the Main Street business district.

Community Plan Committee Attendees: Steven Appler, David Brody, Mary Carr, Paul Iskalo, Brian Kulpa, Vic Paquet, Charles Rizzone, Carolyn Schlifke, Wesley Stone, David Vitka, Edward Zabel

Absent: Thomas Claxton, Kim Giannelli-Calos, Pastor Timothy Madsen, Todd Nelson, Walter Pacer, Kate Waterman-Kulpa

Town/Village Staff: Joelle Guy, Dan Howard, Lynda Juul, Sally Kuzon

Guests: George Grasser and Partners for a Livable Western New York

The Community Plan Committee met with Partners for a Livable Western New York and discussed the areas they felt were of the biggest concern. These included the following:

- Traffic
- Fit of Community Plan with developers
- Moving of storefronts up to Main Street
- Re-emphasis of design style
- Parking
- Walkability and ability to get across Main Street
- Accessibility as well as walkability
- New housing types for the aging
- Process
- Problem identification
- Lack of solutions
- Design solutions
- Predictability of approval process for developers and homeowners
- Parking requirements outdated

The group then broke up into four smaller groups, and each walked one section of Main Street. After the walk, the group reconvened at Village Hall, and the members of Partners for a Livable Western New York each gave their opinion as to the status of the Village. They are as follows.

**Don Erb, Manager of facilities for SUNY Buffalo, active with BOMA (Building Owners & Managers Assoc.)**

The mill doesn't look anything like the logo. It looks awful. The Village needs to come up with a plan to address the whole area back there immediately. You can't be proud of the logo when the mill looks the way it does. There are opportunities for access to the park on the side of the mill. Other places have much steeper inclines that connect to areas like this. There is an opportunity to do some type of development down in the mill area. Possibilities include retail and housing with a parking structure, which would fit well and complete the cul-de-sac feel. Main Street itself consists of traffic, traffic, traffic. There is too much traffic going too fast. The group he was with stopped and spoke with some retailers and residents, who are all scared to cross the street. He understands the retailers are doing pretty well. It would help to re-time lights, add crosswalks, or more radical things like what was done down by UB (planters in the middle of the road, etc.). As far as property maintenance goes, the Village needs to enforce its ordinances. There can't be buildings peeling with paint and grass growing up between the pavers. He felt the Village should stop putting in things it can't maintain. Grass may not be a bad idea because of the extreme width of Main Street. The Village is not maintaining the pavers, and is not making the retailers maintain them either. There is also an issue with the nomenclature of storefront materials. The Village needs a listing of acceptable materials. There is every imaginable material, and a wide variety of signage. Many windows are too small to see what's going on in the store. It's a mish-mosh and could be done better.

**Jad Cordes, Developer and project manger for commercial and high-end residential projects**

He was struck by how different the north and south sides are, particularly at the west end of the Village. He felt there was little evidence of pedestrians – there was not much in the refuse containers. A lot of it is due to the rapid pace of the traffic. The roads are noisier because of the composition of the pavement. It is difficult to talk due to the noise level and difficult to have an intimate walking environment. His group went into Starbucks who reported that 50-60% of their business seems to be in the morning, and most of it walks in the back door, which indicates that they are driving there. Their patio gets some use, but not much. It's behind the building and protected, and has been screened. When they were walking, there was a young couple who was debating where it was safe to cross the street. You can't have this in a walkable community! He thought we have the bones of it – sidewalks and some trees, but wondered if there should be more columnar trees. He was also struck by the attention to the corners. Main Street is becoming increasingly suburban to the west. If you allow that to push its way much further up toward the Village, it will compromise what you're trying to do. You need to stop the harm before you can start doing the good. This side of Main Street tends to be forgotten space. There is garbage and unattended utilities. It's uninviting looking. On the other side of the street, there is more interest. It has been kept clean and lit, and there is some landscaping. He felt that there is a need for some much heavier data on what the shop owners are turning per square foot. Need

to sell that being a business on the first floor has real value. He suggested comparing the Village to regional data or data from other communities.

**Bill Harrington, Attorney (extremely knowledgeable on land use issues)**

He felt that the immediate solution is to do something about the road without involving huge amounts of money. Paul Beyer had a good idea to put an island in the middle of the road. Trees would be okay. He used to live in Eggertsville, and that area doesn't generate the same amount of noise. It's slightly more pleasant. If you can't solve the traffic problem, he doesn't think you will ever get the great village that you want. The village can be utterly charming, but he thinks reduced traffic will make it a much, much better place on its own. He doesn't think that realistically you can cut down the number of lanes. It's too noisy. He thinks the Village could deal with left lane curb cuts. Spring Street is an easy project from an architect/planner's point of view. He suggested spending some money to get some renderings. You could make another Main Street; do a park; do condos. Could keep the parking and keep the landscape better. He felt the Oblitz Group could and has been educated on better ways to do things. There is way too much pavement between the parking lots going towards the mill. This could be changed because the Village owns the mill. On the plaza, you could allow more grass between the sidewalk and the parking lot. The signage could be better. Historic Williamsville sign could be better placed. Bank of America has nice landscape on N. Ellicott. He thought maybe the Village could control the guy on the other side of N. Ellicott to do the same thing – that would make it much more attractive. You need to do what you can when the opportunity presents itself. He also suggested changing the code so that property owners must do things differently when they renovate. He feels that you have to do Main Street first.

**Bill Tuyn, Engineer by education but most often works in the planning area, resident of the Village**

This is his home and he has a great love for Williamsville. There is a wonderful view at the Creekview Restaurant that you take for granted when you live here. The foundation is strong, and he felt that everyone should remember that Williamsville is a neo-traditional development, and what every other place aspires to be. It needs some maintenance and care. The primary problem is the fact that we are located on Route 5 with a tremendous amount of traffic. Need to make sure the businesses are aware that some of the traffic needs to be inconvenienced to be successful. Those driving through at 50 MPH are not stopping to shop, they are just passing through. He observed how long it takes to cross the street. You don't have to do signal studies and timing and all of that. Traffic related issues are much larger than just changing Main Street, and will take a lot of money. The Village needs curb bump-outs as an area for benches and pavers, etc. This inconveniences the plow operators, but that's too bad. The Village needs to sell that to the DOT and get them to come through again and make improvements. This will be very difficult since they just made some improvements. There are some pretty high level people at DOT who live in the Village, so hopefully can get their ear. Having the sidewalk projected out would be helpful. Need to consider dropping the continuous center turn lane into an island for pedestrians. This is something that can be accomplished. Need to invest in the infrastructure if we expect the private business owners to invest in their businesses. This will ultimately improve their buildings, which will create tax revenue. Need to slow the traffic down by decreasing the width of the lane. People will not drive side by side at 50 MPH with thin lanes. Need to plan for the next time DOT comes through here. Bump-outs shorten crossing distance,

and a center island is a refuge. You don't have to do anything else. You don't have to build parking lanes if you turn the streetscape into a commodity. People will suffer the inconvenience of parking. Niagara on the Lake does it, as does Ellicottville. It has to be an attractive place for people to want to do that. Need to protect business owners. There's a big project of moving the toll barriers that has been discussed. Gunville has been talked about, as has Youngs as an alternative interchanges. That would take a lot of the traffic off Main Street instantly. It would not be like William Street because there is an interchange on the west at Main, and on the east at Transit. In between, you can't get anywhere conveniently without using Main Street. The Village should think really hard about developing new codes. The implementation of the plan is in the zoning. We need a code that tells people what we want. Promotion of mixed use on floors above assists with parking requirements. The businesses and residents are out of phase with each other. You can then have one parking lot for two uses. This is the whole concept of a Village. Need to be much more aggressive with maintenance. It is a tragedy that the project at Main & Union is being set back from the street. The building next door is at risk now. It is critical to keep them up front. Another spot is the Town Hall. There is a lack of space, and they have discussed moving for a long time. It would be tragic if Town Hall moved off of Main Street because the Town of Amherst grew out of the Village. The building it set back at 5500 Main Street and it's a big parking lot. It's not attractive to walk across. That would be a great place to turn into a combined Town and Village Hall. The front parking lot could be turned into a plaza and used as a public gathering space. There is also enough space to build liner buildings on the side. Village and Town Hall could then be sold, but the lots could be maintained as municipal. You could also connect the parks (Amherst State Park, Glen Park, and Island Park) for a continuous greenway link. This could add a wonderful trail network. It could be a destination for people outside the Village to enjoy the parks, walk the streets, etc. One idea for the mill is to look at other areas. Rochester High Falls area has the Trip Hammer Grill. They took advantage of what the building used to be and highlighted the mill race. It shows what uses went on inside. That could be done here too. It doesn't have to be just retail use, but could be a museum at the same time, even if it's a commercial use. Hopefully it can be fixed before it burns down. It could be a great thing.

### **Peter Murad, Architect and Planner**

He has three main points, and agrees with everything said already, from an architect/planner's perspective.

He thinks the Village has a goldmine. Everybody here knows that. If you think about it as a place to do what you do every day, the idea of the traffic has to be resolved. This is the key issue. This will make the residential and business fabric better. The Village has a 150 year old history. Other places don't have this history. Also have a creek running through with a park as a focal point. This presents a tremendous opportunity. He thinks the Village need to be very careful about demolishing buildings. They need to be evaluated case by case. How they're renovated and what materials are used is important. Need to try to save as many of the buildings as you can. This can be done through the implementation of design guidelines, so that developers are all on the same playing field. This is what they are trying to do on Elmwood. They are written them up, but haven't been passed. Developers need to know what they can do, and that they can afford to do something. The writing of guidelines and a strict code, and having this legislated is critical. Pine Ave. in Niagara Falls is very similar. They haven't been able to pass design guidelines, so right now it is unprotected. Hamburg did it in less that a year. He

thinks the Village will see more problems if it doesn't get this done. He hasn't been impressed with the new buildings along Main Street in the last 25 years. They are not something that you want to save. The Village should be demanding quality building and quality architecture. It doesn't have to mimic 19<sup>th</sup> century architecture. Buildings can be sensitive to adjacent buildings, but still pedestrian oriented.

**Joe Tocke, Former Transportation Engineer with NYS DOT**

He started out as an architect and then became an engineer. There is quality in this Village. There are some great examples, as well as some bad examples. He discussed traffic. In the short-term, distances between traffic signals in Hamburg are a lot shorter than what is in Williamsville. They have crosswalks without crossing signals, with a cone in the center stating that traffic must yield to pedestrians. He knew that the DOT made bigger parking lanes and smaller driving lanes in the Village, and wondered if this made a difference. Another important thing is continuity as far as tree lines. Some are grass, some are stamped concrete; it's a hodge-podge. The DOT has also put less asphalt in the pavement, which makes it noisier. He thinks it would be good to have a speed study. If traffic is going fast, then better enforcement is needed. You can do traffic calming, but you still need enforcement. Overall he thinks this is a great place. He used to ride his bike from the village of Kenmore and go swimming by the bridge between Island Park and Ed Youngs. There are some interesting places to look at as far as walkways, such as Liffe, Dublin. The Village needs to tighten the reins on what's happening out there. He liked Paul Iskalo's rehab work. You look at other and wonder if you're in the same Village.

**George Grasser, Former Attorney, Real Estate Consultant, and President and Chief Executive of Partners for a Livable Western New York**

He wanted to compliment the merchants – they have done a wonderful job with their windows. He saw very few covered up. Mirrored glass should never be allowed. When a store covers things up, it's an invitation not to go in. Mid-block crossings make sense, as do bulb-outs (Village of Lancaster). Have 6-10 great sites for mid-rise mixed use buildings. The negative for housing is the traffic on Main Street. People want to live in a place where the traffic isn't so fast. He suggested looking at 10' lanes. People drive to the geometry of the road. The DOT says you can't because it's a truck route. Why not move truck route to Sheridan? Need to get moving on the code, signage, zoning, etc. Need some rules that everybody plays by. He doesn't like interior lit signs, and there are a lot of those. Parking is a problem. Need more off-street parking behind the buildings. This means encroaching on residential areas, but you need to do it. He suggested combining parking lots and doing the plowing. Employees need to park off Main Street – they are taking parking away from customers. Babylon, Long Island has meters where the timer starts when you pull into the parking lot – there is no money exchanged.

**Timothy Trabold, Planner with the Greater Buffalo Niagara Regional Transportation Committee (GBNRTC)**

The cars are taken care of, and it's time to take care of other users. He can envision a median and a canopy of trees. This would help absorb the sound. Mid-block crossings would also be helpful. Cars will stop. Bulb-outs would cut down the width of the street. He noticed the parks on south and north sides of Main Street. Access under the bridge to connect the parks would provide a linear path, which would be a great amenity. Maybe something innovative could be

done. The bridge necks down and the parking lane disappears. He thought there should be some warning to get up on the sidewalk, or at least to warn that the lane is being shared. He commented that he has never seen a push button crossing to cross a driveway, but there's one in front of Ed Young's at the Creekview Restaurant. That's a siren going off saying something is wrong with pedestrian accommodation! There are a lot of driveways with rear parking, which would require access management. This means u-turns or other access. At Oakgrove to Ellicott there are four or five parking lots with grass or little fences between them. On Oakgrove at the corner there is a church on the east and dry cleaner on the west. The delivery trucks are up on a paved area and the road surface is very wide. If the road was narrowed down, you could put angled parking near the dry cleaner. The church could use this on Sunday, and it would not interfere with dry cleaner.

### **Brendan Hand, Attorney**

He would reduce Mains Street to two lanes by putting in diagonal parking on both sides of the street. He would also put in a bike lane. He thought there should be crosswalks at every intersection. A carousel in front of Main Street would be nice. You could bring the light rail up from the campus. Reduce the speed limit to 25 mph.

### **Additional Commentary**

David Brody stated that several people have mentioned narrowing Main Street, but only one person mentioned that it's a state truck route. Every time this gets to the DOT, the response is that it can't be changed. Is this really true? Could the community rise up in arms to get this?

George Grasser felt that this was a truck route before Sheridan Drive was widened. He wondered if you could put a median in and still address the truck width. You probably could. A DOT representative stated that it would be very difficult to change it from being a truck route, but did not rule out the possibility. It would be difficult to reduce the road to two lanes because of the volume.

Dave Vitka noted that the group saw the traffic at a calm period of the day. It is not like that between 12 PM and 3:30 PM. It takes him 25 minutes to get from Williamsville South to Forest Elementary. It's a parking lot at noon. Segmented zoning leads to this problem – everyone is out at noon going to the same place. People drive to restaurants. He asked if people are passing through or going somewhere on Main Street? If they are only passing through, who cares if traffic is slow? One member stated that he avoids coming to Main Street, and goes down Sheridan or Maple instead.

There is a tremendous demand in this area. The GBNRTC has done a fair amount of work for the community plan.

One of the members compared Fairport to Williamsville. Fairport's Main Road is much narrower. It adds to the overall look and feel. Perinton, Penfield, and others seem to do just fine with the narrower street. Williamsville could talk to them. Bill Tuyn thought that Fairport and those areas don't have anywhere near the volume of traffic that the Village has. Batavia has

done a lot over the last few years and it looks spectacular. If the DOT can do it in Batavia, they can do it here. Route 20 in Skaneateles was also brought up. Premier villages are few and far between, but Williamsville could be one.

Paul Iskalo thought that there's a potential for that here, but there has to be the political will.

Is there a place for a mid-rise residence (4, 5, or 6 stories)? A village is supposed to have density. Look at Elmwood village – you can't get in there. The demand is incredible. These people usually have money and no kids in the school system. If you don't keep them, they'll go to Florida.

One person present from the DOT stated that everything is open right now. It has been two years since the repaving of Route 5. They looked at narrowing the lanes, count-down timers, and ladder crosswalks. The Village was just getting into the Community Plan. They haven't formally been part of the process, but would like to see any vision that comes from the community. He will take a very serious look at that. They need to know the whole vision for the corridor. You may not be able to do everything, but there may be compromises or alternatives. Right now nothing is off the table. The median idea has a lot of merit.

George Grasser reminded everyone that the Village of Hamburg got four roundabouts, when there were only two in New York State.

Paul Iskalo thinks there is a concern in the group that the Village is fully built out and that there isn't an ability to add any housing units. He's of the opinion that if the Village gave him the approvals, he would find the space to do it. George Grasser commented that with the aging population and the cost of gasoline, people want to be in more walkable locations.

There was member of the group who visited Dallas in June and went to Forth Worth. There is a tremendous amount of housing being built downtown. They are going to flood the Trinity River basin to create a waterfront. You are seeing things like this all over the country. Paul Iskalo stated that the main concern is where that would happen. George Grasser felt that the Village isn't fully built up – there is the Mobil station, Touch of Brass, and Fleet Bank drive-through. You could put a high-rise at the Touch of Brass site that would be overlooking the water. You want people to live in the Village rather than having another drug store or a patio development in Clarence.

A member spoke about the Annex neighborhood in Toronto. This shows that you can mix business in a residential area and it makes for a good neighborhood. Architecture is key. The tough sell here is the walkability of Main Street. The amount of noise is incredible. You can barely hear yourself when walking on Main Street.

There is an aversion to density in Amherst. But that's what brings in money and increases property values. It carries through into the Village politically. The public awareness is growing that there's a different pattern occurring. It's important for buildings not to be single use.

Paul Iskalo thanked the Partnership for a Livable Western New York for putting on the walk this evening. He stated that he has been involved in the Town of Amherst Comprehensive Plan, zoning code, this Community Plan, and in other groups as well. In all the sessions he's been at, this by far has been the most information, beneficial, and he thanked each one for their time spent tonight.

Sally Kuzon also thanked George Grasser and all the members who attended tonight.

The meeting ended at approximately 9:00 PM.