

# INTRODUCTION



This Comprehensive Plan was developed to guide the City of Cortland, its departments and boards, and its residents in making sound decisions regarding land use and development, and to establish strategies to address issues facing the City. Cortland is a tightly knit community with a good quality of life, a relatively low crime rate, and a strong downtown. Cortland is blessed with an abundance of natural and built resources, high quality educational and civic institutions, a fortuitous geographical location, and a hard working and creative citizenry.

As the plan details, however, the City is beset with a number of intractable problems. Historically, Cortland enjoyed over a century of growth and relative prosperity built on a strong manufacturing foundation starting with the post Civil War industrial revolution. The latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, however, brought about a collapse of this economic foundation as many companies closed, downsized, or left the area. Other manufacturers have relocated outside the City to the Town of Cortlandville, along with significant retail development. In recent decades the City has struggled. Many good jobs have been lost, the population has declined, and poverty has increased. With a shrinking tax base and a large number of tax exempt parcels, the City is struggling to meet its financial obligations. Fiscal concerns in 2010 have resulted in hiring freezes, budgetary cutbacks, and even discussion of dissolving City government. Much of the City's housing stock is deteriorating, and recent years have seen growing conflicts between expanding student housing and traditionally owner-occupied neighborhoods.

Cortland is at a crossroads. The blue collar manufacturing community that Cortland once was is largely gone. The City must fundamentally redefine and reinvent itself in order to reverse the decline of recent decades and remain a viable community in the future. The structure of the national economy has changed, and Cortland must change with it. The rust-belt mindset must be set aside, and a new economy developed in order to compete on the regional, statewide, and national levels: one based on the College, education, arts, culture, recreation, tourism, high-tech and green jobs, and other emerging trends. Strong neighborhoods, a vibrant downtown, and a high quality of life must be fostered in order to support new economic opportunities, and to create the sense of place and community that is needed to compete in today's world.

This long-range document provides recommendations for future action and helps prioritize choices for the allocation of resources. It cannot address every issue the City is facing, but it helps to set a new direction for the City, and provides both a larger vision and attainable goals to achieve that vision and position it well for the next century.



## BACKGROUND

This Comprehensive Plan is a guide to promoting the health, safety, and general welfare of the people of the City of Cortland. Comprehensive planning forms the basis of efforts by a municipality to logically guide the development of its natural and built environment and sustain and improve its quality of life. Significant decisions and actions affecting the immediate and long-range protection, enhancement, growth, and development can be influenced by the goals and implementation measures stated in its Comprehensive Plan. A Plan not only serves as a guide in addressing key issues facing the community today, but will also assist in responding to new opportunities and challenges in the future.

A Comprehensive Plan also serves as the foundation for land use zoning regulations and any amendments made to such regulations. A comprehensive plan is not a regulatory document itself, although land use management and policy changes could be a result of implementation of the plan. A sound plan will serve as a legal defense of a community's land use management policies and decisions.



## NEW YORK STATE STATUTES

Components of a comprehensive plan are suggested by New York State statutes that authorize local governments to prepare a comprehensive plan. The State recognizes that significant decisions and actions affecting communities are made at the local level. One of the most important powers and duties granted by the legislature to local government is the authority and responsibility to undertake comprehensive planning. New York State's definition of a comprehensive plan, the suggested elements that it may contain, as well as procedural requirements for development and adoption, are found in General City Law §28-a (City comprehensive plan). The adoption of a comprehensive plan under these statutes is voluntary.

New York statutes require that all land use regulations be in conformance with a comprehensive plan. Adopting land use regulations that conform to an up-to-date comprehensive plan provides significant legal protection for such regulations. Land use regulations are not limited to zoning that separates the community into zoning districts and specifies land uses, building dimensions, and yard requirements in each zone; but may also include regulations that protect natural resources, slopes, historic districts, and view sheds, to name a few.



# DEVELOPING THE PLAN

## REASON FOR PREPARING THE PLAN

In every community, including the City of Cortland, various public agencies, private organizations, and individuals continuously undertake planning activities and make decisions that, individually and cumulatively, can affect a community's future and impact the quality of life. It is prudent to periodically review the larger picture in order to evaluate the impact of emerging trends; deal with land use issues; ascertain the concerns of citizens and stakeholders; and, ultimately, decide whether policy changes are needed to chart the future desired course of the community.

This comprehensive planning process is the result of the desire of the City of Cortland to become more proactive in guiding the changing conditions in the City, and to combat the socioeconomic decline the City has experienced in recent years. This Plan will serve as a blueprint for future action by the Common Council, Planning Board, Zoning Board of Appeals, Historic District Commission, City Departments, and the community as a whole as it deals with growth and change.



Cortland's comprehensive planning process evolved over many months, beginning in Fall 2007. This plan is based upon the values, concerns, and feelings of City residents and landowners. The public participation components of Cortland's planning process are described in Chapter 2 following and in the appendices.

## FUNDING

Development of the Plan was funded, in part, through a \$54,000 Quality Communities grant from the New York State Department of State.

## PLAN PREPARATION

Thoma Development Consultants (Thoma) was hired by the City of Cortland through a competitive procurement process to assist in the development of the City's Comprehensive Plan. Founded in 1980, Thoma is a community development consulting firm based in Cortland, New York. They have 30 years of experience working with the City on its planning and community development needs.

In addition to analyzing the information gathered through public meetings, surveys, and Steering Committee meetings, Thoma also referenced pertinent U.S. Census and other data in



preparing the Plan, including relevant demographic information obtained from Claritas, Inc., a reputable third party marketing research firm. Thoma provided input into the Plan based on the experience and expertise of its staff and knowledge garnered through 30 years of work with the City. This information is referenced throughout the Plan and so noted.

## **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

Community involvement in creating the plan was critical. It was important for Cortland to provide a variety of venues for the citizens and business and property owners in the City to provide input into the plan. This provides “ownership” of the plan and allows the residents to feel they had a voice in determining the future of the community. Listed following is a description of each of the citizen participation venues and processes.

### **Steering Committee**

The City of Cortland Steering Committee, created by the local governing body, was composed of political representatives, Planning Board and Historic Commission members, local officials, and non-elected community members. It designed the Comprehensive Plan, in part, by guiding the process through consultation, participation, public outreach, discussing and articulating possibilities, and serving as a setting for developing the common goals and strategies that were ultimately included in the Comprehensive Plan. Membership of the City of Cortland Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee included:

Vivian Bosch, College Hill Neighborhood Association

Chris Calabro, rental property owner and developer

Tom Gallagher, Mayor (retired December 2009)

Nancy Hansen, Planning Board Chair

Bob Isaf, resident

Linda Kline, Historic District Commission Chair

Steve Muka, rental property owner

Mark Prus, SUNY Cortland

Connie Sorrells, resident and City employee

Tom Terwilliger, business owner

Garry VanGorder, Executive Director, Cortland County BDC

Val VanGorder, former City Councilperson

Susan Williams, resident



## Residents Survey

A Residents Survey was completed by mail. The survey instrument and compiled results are included in Appendix A. In November of 2007, the survey was sent to randomly selected owner-occupied and renter households. The ratio of owner-occupants to renters was based on the percentage of these households as they exist in the City per the 2000 Census (44% owner-occupants versus 56% renters). The City sent a total of 475 surveys and received

177 completed surveys. This is a 37.3% response rate. The survey represented 389 persons. Although the survey is helpful in gauging community sentiment in a broad sense, the results should only be used in the context of this plan.



The survey asked questions on the tenure of units such as the number of persons in the household, their age, and how long they have lived in the City. The survey asked questions on shopping habits and what residents in the City value most in their community. Several questions focused on land use management

and there were several open-ended questions which gave respondents the opportunity to voice their opinions on issues such as what they like most about living in Cortland, whether Cortland has become a more/less desirable place to live, and how did they envision the future of Cortland.

## Public Visioning Meetings

Three public visioning sessions were held in as part of the plan development. The meeting topics centered on: presenting information about the comprehensive plan process and allowing for public input on the positive and negative attributes of living in Cortland. Information compiled during these meetings is detailed in Appendix B.

## CRMC Focus Group

A focus group meeting of residents and business owners in the neighborhood near the Cortland Regional Medical Center (CRMC) and CRMC administration was held at the hospital on January 28, 2009. This was an opportunity for the hospital to provide an update on future expansion plans; for neighborhood residents and business owners to discuss the positive and negative impacts associated with living and conducting business near the hospital; as well as providing a forum to identify opportunities for accommodating future growth while improving the hospital neighborhood. More information regarding the Focus Group meeting is included in Chapter 3, Section VI. *Housing*.



## College Student Involvement

**Survey** - Thoma Development Consultants worked with a group of Urban Sociology Students from SUNY Cortland to gauge the concerns and sentiments of the student population. With guidance from Thoma, the class undertook face-to-face surveys of fellow college students. A total of 74 survey responses were obtained. The survey provides insight into how these students view their temporary home, and how they access goods and services in the community. The survey instrument and results are included in Appendix C.

**Mapping** - As detailed in Chapter 3, Inventory and Analysis, Section VI. *Housing*, Thoma, working with the Urban Sociology students, with assistance from the College Hill Neighborhood Association, developers, and the City Code Office, mapped the location of student housing in neighborhoods surrounding SUNY Cortland.

## Planning Process Milestones

The following events took place from the time of project initiation for the development and adoption of the Comprehensive Plan:

- Steering Committee Kick-Off Meeting (October 15, 2007)
- City resident mail survey (November-December 2007)
- City Visioning / Goal Sessions (December 2007)
- Regular meetings of Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee (January 2007 through October 2009)
- Review of draft plan by Steering Committee (January 2010)
- Approval of final draft plan by Steering Committee (August 2010)
- Public Presentation/Open House for public review of Comprehensive Plan
- Recommendation of the Comprehensive Plan to the City Common Council and Planning Commission
- Review of Comprehensive Plan by Cortland County Planning Department and County Planning Board (\_\_\_\_\_, 2010)
- Review of the Comprehensive Plan by the City of Cortland Planning Board
- Final Public Hearing
- SEQRA Determination
- Adoption of Comprehensive Plan by City Common Council

## Comprehensive Plan Implementation

The *Goals* identified in the City of Cortland Comprehensive Plan (Chapter 3) are the result of significant deliberation provided by the City's appointed Steering Committee. They are based on a careful review of the input provided by residents and property owners in the City, organizations and persons with a vested interest in Cortland, the observations and experience of the City's consultant, and the adopted Vision Statement. These goals are broad



statements that reflect the ideal future conditions desired by the City. The City and its departments should work to ensure that future decisions, actions, and projects are consistent with these overarching goals.

The *Implementation Measures* which follow each goal are a series of action steps or strategies that the City should implement to achieve each goal in the Comprehensive Plan. The Implementation Measures are prioritized to provide the City with direction regarding the desired timeframe to undertake each action. The City acknowledges, however, that it is difficult to forecast future change and opportunities, and that it will be necessary from time to time to revisit, add, remove, revise, or reorder its Implementation Measures based on current conditions.

