

V. DOWNTOWN

THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

The built environment of downtown Cortland is typical of downtowns across New York State, with attached, multi-story commercial blocks clustered in a dense development pattern. The downtown is classified as the Central Business District (CBD) in the City's zoning. The spine of the downtown stretches from North Main Street near Maple Avenue and then several blocks southward along Main Street to Argyle Place in the City's South End Neighborhood. It stretches one block east to Church Street, and westward along Groton Avenue to Homer Avenue.



Most, if not all, of the City's original wood framed downtown structures are gone, replaced by larger, grander buildings in the latter half of the 19th Century. The downtown fully developed in the mid 1800's and, to a great extent, retains the character of a Victorian era business district, with a wide array of 19th century commercial architectural styles represented. Throughout the years, some new buildings have infilled where earlier structures have been lost, so there are also examples of 20th and 21st century architectural styles as well. Most of the downtown is listed on the State and National Register of Historic Places, and is also a locally designated historic district. The City's local historic district designation mandates that all projects undertaken in the Main Street/Tompkins Street Historic District be reviewed by a local board to ensure that the work undertaken is architecturally appropriate. This has, to a large extent, preserved much of the architectural character of the downtown; however, this character is still threatened by small, incremental losses that can have a cumulative negative impact on downtown character.

In the late 1980's and early 1990's major streetscape improvements greatly enhanced the Main Street Corridor. Improvements included brick medians, bump-outs at intersections to improve pedestrian safety, street trees, planting beds, and decorative lamp posts. Similar improvements were made to Main Street, south of Tompkins Street, in 2005 as part of a reconstruction of the street. In 2006, planting beds and signage were installed in a number of downtown parking areas. In 2010, Main Street was milled and repaved. These improvements provide the downtown with a sense of place and character that adds to its appeal. It also improved the downtown's handicapped accessibility through curb cuts, audio crosswalk signals, and other improvements. The downtown does not, however, provide any benches for the elderly or physically impaired to sit and rest, and some earlier streetscape improvements are starting to show their age.



As detailed fully below, a series of programs to assist property owners with façade and building renovations has also improved building conditions and the overall appearance of the downtown.

DOWNTOWN ECONOMY

The dramatic loss of industry and jobs in Cortland County in the latter half of the 20th century devastated the local economy. During the same period, a monumental shift in American's purchasing habits resulted in most retail activity moving from traditional downtowns to regional malls and big box retailers on urban fringes. The Downtown was not immune and lost most of its traditional national retail anchors stores, such as J.C. Penney, Montgomery Wards, J.J. Newberry's, Sears, and Barbara Moss. Concerted efforts over the years, however, have allowed the downtown to fare relatively well compared to many other downtowns in the State. This is partly due to the presence of SUNY Cortland, which is within walking distance of Main Street, as well as the hard work, determination, and investment from the City and downtown stakeholders.

The downtown has also been fortunate to retain other important service-related/governmental anchors, including City Hall, the Police and Fire Department, the Post Office, and the public library, while County governmental offices are located adjacent to the downtown. The downtown is also fortunate to have several larger commercial employers, including McNeil Insurance and WendCentral. These employ hundreds of persons and are significant economic drivers in the downtown. Retaining these businesses in the CBD is essential.

Retail - Over the years, the retail sector has fluctuated, but currently traditional retail is struggling. Due to the presence of the College, there are many pizza parlors, delis, bars, and similar student-oriented businesses. Many other storefronts are filled with restaurants, offices, banks, and service businesses. A larger percentage of these businesses are small, independent establishments that are struggling to survive. There has traditionally been relatively few first floor vacancies, but numbers have increased in recent years. Vacancy rates on upper floors are much higher. A number of new retail and food businesses opened in the downtown in 2010, an encouraging sign of the health of downtown.

The foundation of downtown success must be rooted in a strong and diverse downtown economy. This includes a strong retail base. The City must consider development of healthy downtown economy, including retail, as an integral component to overall economic development efforts. The continued conversion of retail space to other commercial uses should be a concern to the City.

A vibrant downtown is also important in attracting new businesses to the community as a whole. A downtown serves as a barometer of the health and quality of life in a community, which are growing influences in a company's siting decisions. Therefore, the City must consider



ongoing downtown revitalization and redevelopment efforts as the foundation of their overall economic development efforts.

Arts and Cultural Center – Since its creation several years ago, the Cortland Downtown Partnership, in concert with other organizations, has been working to develop the downtown as a center for arts and culture in the area. Until very recently, the downtown had two buildings housing music studios, although one recently closed, a number of venues offering live musical performances, an outside summer concert series, and numerous festivals and events, in addition to many eating and drinking establishments. The Cortland Repertory Theater (CRT), a local performing arts organization, has recently purchased a vacant downtown building with plans to convert it to a year round production and performance facility. These form a strong foundation for an arts and cultural center in the downtown. Efforts to expand and market this economic niche should continue. Consideration should be also be given to the larger “creative economy”, including architects, designers, graphic artists, fashion designers, web designers, and similar businesses.



SUNY Cortland – The College is located a block or so uphill from the downtown. A number of upper floors in downtown buildings are used for student housing, and the College utilizes the Beard Building at 9 Main Street as a home for its Office of Civic Engagement and for additional classroom space. The College’s Alumni House is located nearby. In addition to students, faculty, and staff, SUNY Cortland also attracts many visitors from outside the community, particularly for athletic events. In 2009, the College was also the summer training camp for the New York Jets, who have since signed a five-year commitment to return (see also Section III. *Economic Development*). In addition to SUNY Cortland, Tompkins-Cortland Community College (TC3) is constructing a new extension center on the south end of the downtown.



The students, faculty, and staff at SUNY Cortland, in addition to events at the college, are a prime market opportunity for the downtown.

Despite the proximity of college functions to the downtown, the level of business activity focused on the College seems to be low. There are a number of bars, delis, and pizzerias in the downtown which are likely the result of the College population. There is a bookstore that primarily sells textbooks, and a business provides embroidery, silk screening, and other goods and services that cater to College students and organizations. Another business provides tanning services. Otherwise, few businesses cater to the



College market. For instance, the embroidery store is the sole location in downtown Cortland where one can purchase SUNY Cortland apparel. Furthermore, there is no high quality downtown hotel, so visitors to SUNY events do not have the opportunity to stay near downtown, a lost business opportunity.

Providing goods and services to the College population, and capitalizing on College events, is a market niche that the downtown should pursue in order to strengthen existing businesses and attract new businesses. Efforts need to be made to connect the College and downtown. The College currently provides transportation to shopping centers outside the City. Similar transportation should be provided between the College and downtown. Busses only pick up students from the downtown on weekends to minimize vandalism by students who may have been drinking downtown. Marketing efforts should be focused to draw new students and visitors into the downtown. At the same time, concerns should be addressed in a proactive manner. For instance, downtown classrooms are a great opportunity to bring people into the downtown, but provisions need to be made so that students are not monopolizing valuable on-street parking.

Digital Downtown – Cortland County is located in the middle of a “technology triangle” with three designated New York State Centers for Advanced Technology located nearby at Cornell, Binghamton, and Syracuse Universities. These provide a significant opportunity for the community and the downtown. Given the proper circumstances, the downtown can be a prime location for significant new business and job development in emerging and green technology businesses, particularly on upper floors. This market should be considered as an opportunity for strengthening the downtown economy.

Downtown Living – The greatest upper floor use in the downtown is housing. As mentioned previously, nearly all of the existing housing in the downtown is geared toward students. This is likely due to the fact that student rental housing typically provides greater revenue than other housing types. There is a national trend towards living in downtowns, particularly for young professionals looking for a vibrant and interesting place to live. Older residents, including “empty nesters” and retirees are also often interested in living downtown. A diverse downtown housing market is vital to a downtown economy, as downtown residents buy goods and services near their homes, and as rents help support proper building maintenance. The City must work with local property owners and developers to create high-quality market rate housing in the downtown and attract a more affluent population to the City center. While housing geared toward students is an important part of the downtown housing market, the City must guard against an over-proliferation of student housing and work to create housing diversity (see also Section VI. *Housing*).

BUILDING CONDITIONS

The appearance of downtown commercial buildings is generally good. Significant public and private investments in recent years have had a considerable impact, and local historic preservation requirements have helped to maintain character. The City was awarded façade improvement funds in the early 1990’s. In 2004, the City was awarded a \$650,000 Community



Development Block Grant, part of which was used for façade and building renovations. The City has also worked with two local non-profits, the Cortland Housing Assistance Council and the Cortland Downtown Partnership to leverage three New York Main Street awards totaling \$600,000 to renovate building facades and interiors. As a result, many facades are attractive with new paint, awnings, and quality signage. Despite this, there are still many buildings in the downtown with facades that are inappropriate, deteriorated, and are a blight on the downtown.

There is a significant amount of vacant space in the downtown, both on first floors and upper floors. However, the vacancy rate in Cortland is probably less than many other historic downtowns in New York State. Nevertheless, in order for buildings to be maintained in good condition, they need to be economically viable. It is difficult to provide proper maintenance on an older structure when only half or a third of the building is generating income. Full use of all buildings in the downtown should be an important goal in downtown revitalization efforts. The lack of elevators or other handicapped access to upper floors can be a detriment to their re-use, and the introduction of elevators into existing historic buildings can be difficult and costly. Nevertheless, universal access in downtown structures is important in ensuring their economic viability in the future. Full occupancy and use of structures is vital in ensuring their survival, and in supporting a strong downtown economy.

While most downtown buildings are in fair to good condition, there are several that are wholly vacant and/or severely deteriorated. These include, but are not limited to, 1 Main Street; 2 Main Street; 53-55 Main Street, two adjacent buildings heavily damaged by fire a number of years ago and never repaired; and 26 Port Watson Street, a vacant former bowling alley, although this has recently been acquired by CRT. Vacant and poorly maintained buildings not only blight the downtown, but they can pose significant hazards. In 1999, a Main Street building had to be demolished by the City because it had dangerously deteriorated. Four years later, a building on Groton Avenue partially collapsed onto an adjacent parking lot and was subsequently torn down, partly due to fire damage that was left unrepaired for years. The City was fortunate in that no one was injured. Five commercial buildings have been damaged or destroyed by fire in the downtown since 2004, an average of one per year. While not all these fires were accidental, several were and highlight the need for vigilant maintenance. The City has no legal mechanisms to require maintenance on vacant or partially vacant buildings, and cannot even inspect such



structures for safety and code violations. Boarded windows are not prohibited. There is no prohibition against “demolition by neglect”, which is deferring maintenance until the building collapses or must be torn down. Older buildings are generally grandfathered from the most current building codes, and it is unknown how many buildings are serviced by sprinklers or have integrated fire detection systems. These factors combine to create a very dangerous situation, and it is very possible that a fire in any one downtown building could destroy adjacent buildings.



Downtown’s historic architecture is vital to its long-term success, and these older buildings must be preserved.

The City must work diligently to ensure that buildings are well maintained and protected from deferred maintenance, decay, fire, and other hazards. The City should strictly enforce all applicable building codes regarding downtown buildings and seek funding to assist property owners with undertaking renovations and upgrades, including sprinklers. The City should also work to ensure that property owners are aware of the financial assistance available to assist in renovations, including State and Federal historic preservation tax credits.

Additional information on downtown’s historic structures, and suggestions for preserving them can be found in Section I. *Historic Resources*.

PARKING

As is typical in most 19th Century downtowns, parking is a concern. Numerous studies have been conducted over the years to investigate parking concerns and potential solutions. A Downtown Strategic Plan completed in 2002 clearly showed that the overwhelming issue of concern for downtown patrons and businesses was the lack of parking. Respondents to a survey completed as part of the plan cited parking as a weakness almost three times more often than other issues. The aforementioned conversion from retail space to commercial space results in a higher ratio of employees per square foot, thus creating more demand for long-term parking.

Despite these parking perceptions, the irony is that the downtown has plentiful and mostly free parking. In addition to free on-street parking, long and short-term parking is available in eight lots scattered about downtown. The Cortland Downtown Partnership administers a parking permit program for the City’s parking lots. The permits allow users to park in downtown lots for extended periods and overnight. Parking under two hours is free. The cost for a parking permit is very affordable, and likely is cheaper than parking fees in similar cities. The fees generated from this program are split between the City and the Partnership. This is an important revenue source for the Partnership and assists them in undertaking other revitalization efforts.



In summary, the main issue of concern is the perception that parking is a problem rather than an actual shortage of parking spaces. Observation surveys of parking habits in Cortland have shown that free, two-hour on-street parking can be tight at times, although spaces are generally available and there is a good turnover rate. The eight public parking lots are generally 20% to 40% vacant during the weekday, which is a healthy vacancy rate. Long-term parking for



employees is the most pressing problem, but inexpensive parking permits are a good solution. Corporate tenants in the downtown that may wish to expand are concerned about parking for new employees, and significant expansions in their workforces could overload available parking options. Developers have also expressed concern about providing potential tenants, including residential tenants, with long-term and overnight parking.

At this juncture, it is not necessary for the City to invest in the development of additional parking lots or structures. If demand increases in the future, construction of a parking ramp or garage should be considered. The City should work closely with the Cortland Downtown Partnership, area businesses, property owners, and developers to ensure that existing parking facilities are managed in a manner that meets current needs, such as providing designated overnight parking, or increasing long-term set-aside parking for employers. The removal of buildings to accommodate new surface parking should be avoided, particularly along Main Street and at major intersections.

DOWNTOWN MANAGEMENT

The ongoing management and revitalization of the downtown is being undertaken by the Cortland Downtown Partnership (CDP), a non-profit organization. The City of Cortland is a founding partner in the CDP, and the Mayor is an ex-officio member of the Board or Directors.



The CDP is organized under the “Main Street Approach” to downtown revitalization. The National Trust for Historic Preservation created the Main Street model and it has been successfully used to revitalize downtowns throughout the nation. The program outlines four broad areas, or points, important to downtown revitalization. This four-point approach includes Organization, Design, Promotion, and Economic Restructuring. It also stresses that revitalization efforts must be undertaken in partnership with the various downtown stakeholders, and that efforts must be incremental in nature.



As a vital part of its economic development strategy, the City needs to continue its close association with, and support of, the CDP. This includes ongoing financial support, technical assistance, and cooperation on issues impacting the downtown. At some juncture, the City may want to consider establishing a Business Improvement District (BID) for the downtown area in order to provide financial operating support for the CDP. A BID is a special taxing district established by and for downtown property owners and, by extension, the entire downtown. The amount of funds to be levied via the BID, and the use of those tax revenues, are determined as part of the BID development. Cortland is one of the few cities in the region that does not fund downtown revitalization efforts with a BID.



GOALS AND IMPLEMENTATION MEASURES

GOAL 13: Manage the Downtown effectively to promote a strong downtown economy.

IMPLEMENTATION MEASURES:

- A) Continue to implement the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street Approach through an effective and successful Cortland Downtown Partnership.
- B) Investigate the development of a Business Improvement District to financially support downtown development and the Cortland Downtown Partnership.
- C) Continue to financially support the Cortland Downtown Partnership as a important economic development activity.

GOAL 14: Establish the downtown as a center of arts, culture, and entertainment in the City and County.

IMPLEMENTATION MEASURES:

- A) Seek funding and partner with downtown property owners to develop artist live/work spaces, studios, and galleries.
- B) Continue partnership with the Cortland Downtown Partnership, the Cultural Council of Cortland County, the Cortland County Convention and Visitors Bureau, and other individuals and organizations to promote the arts in the downtown.
- C) Partner with SUNY Cortland and other organizations to place outside sculptures and other artwork in and around the downtown, particularly in the courtyard space between the Groton Avenue parking lot and Main Street.

GOAL 15: Create a diverse and robust downtown economy

IMPLEMENTATION MEASURES:

- A) Entice the development of a high quality full service hotel in the Central Business District.
- B) Support retail development as a vital part of the downtown and leverage the presence of SUNY Cortland to attract and retain retail businesses.
- C) Prohibit residences in ground floor storefronts in the CBD.



- D) Promote the development of small-to-medium sized high-tech businesses on upper floors of downtown structures in an effort to create a “digital downtown”.
- E) Establish a wireless internet system serving the downtown.
- F) Work with the Cortland County Convention and Visitors Bureau, Cortland County Chamber of Commerce, Cortland County Business Development Corporation, SUNY Cortland, Greek Peak, and other organizations, businesses, and events to direct traffic down Main Street as opposed to Church Street.
- G) Work with NYS Department of Transportation and other partners to install wayfinding signage to direct visitors, particularly those from I-81, to the downtown.

GOAL 16: Support the preservation of historic buildings as an integral part of the economic success of the downtown.

IMPLEMENTATION MEASURES:

- A) Expand the Historic District to include all areas of the Central Business District. Ensure that adopted design standards are in place. (see also Section I. *Historic Resources*)
- B) Leverage public funds, including State and federal historic preservation tax credits, and forge partnerships with private developers to redevelop historic properties in the downtown.
- C) Ensure adequate code enforcement resources are available to regularly inspect properties, particularly vacant properties and vacant areas of buildings.
- D) Consider adoption of a strict building maintenance code for the Central Business District.
- E) Prohibit the covering of windows with plywood or other materials except in cases of emergency and only for a limited period of time, e.g., 14 days.
- F) Establish local laws to guard against “demolition by neglect” and other significant decay of downtown buildings (see also Section XIV. *Land Use and Zoning*).
- G) Develop incentives to encourage property owners to utilize “green” building techniques or to seek LEED certification to improve energy efficiency and overall sustainability of the City’s built environment (see also Section II. *Natural Resources* and Section XIV. *Land Use and Zoning*).



GOAL 17: Create a diverse and dense housing mix in the downtown, particularly market rate rental housing.

IMPLEMENTATION MEASURES:

- A) Work with private developers to leverage funding for market rate housing, such as historic preservation tax credits or other grant funding.
- B) Remain cognizant of emerging housing needs and trends, such as housing for college staff, young professionals, or aging empty nesters, and the accompanying parking to support such housing.

GOAL 18: Provide sufficient parking opportunities and actively manage parking to accommodate the downtown's changing parking needs.

IMPLEMENTATION MEASURES:

- A) Develop structured parking to alleviate long-term parking concerns and stimulate future development.
- B) Establish agreements with owners of underutilized parking areas to allow for public parking.
- C) Proactively manage available parking in the downtown through permit systems, long versus short-term parking, overnight parking, restricted parking, and other strategies and tactics to maximize the availability and convenience of downtown parking.
- D) Prohibit the demolition of structures to accommodate new surface parking except under rare circumstances and where such demolition will not interrupt the rhythm of the streetscape or create open parking areas more than 75' in length along Main Street. Prohibit the creation of parking lots at corners/intersections under all circumstances (see also Section XIV. *Land Use and Zoning*).
- E) Require all parking areas to be landscaped and screened in a manner consistent with other public parking areas in the downtown.

GOAL 19: Provide a high level of maintenance for downtown infrastructure including roads, sidewalks, medians, curbing, trees, street furniture, landscaping, and parking lots.

IMPLEMENTATION MEASURES:

- A) In cooperation with the Cortland Downtown Partnership, establish a database of all public physical assets in the downtown with noted condition, dates of construction,



major improvements, and/or installation, and work that is or may be needed in the future.

- B) In cooperation with the Cortland Downtown Partnership, conduct an annual survey of downtown's infrastructure to identify areas of concern and note emerging problems.
- C) Establish a long-range capital plan to address infrastructure maintenance and improvements.

