
INTRODUCTION



I. INTRODUCTION

REASON FOR PREPARING THE STRATEGIC PLAN

The City of Cortland has developed this Strategic Plan to improve the conditions in an area referred to in this plan as the South End Neighborhood. Collaborative planning processes, such as this strategic planning process, allow thoughts and visions to be shared that may inspire or define new or dormant ideas. This Strategic Plan illustrates building blocks for creating a South End Neighborhood that engages the local community in affecting positive change.

This planning process allowed the community to identify issues facing the South End today and think about principles, policies, and actions that should be implemented to revitalize the neighborhood. This Strategic Plan should be used as a tool to undertake specific actions to lead the community to their desired vision. The Plan can be used to better identify current and changing physical, social, political, and economic conditions, as well as to understand the forces behind such conditions and trends.

The preparation of this document served as:

- the impetus for soliciting public input with respect to identifying the needs, development opportunities, and preferences for future growth;
- to prioritize attainable goals;
- and, most importantly, to establish a step-by-step process for achieving a healthy, vibrant South End Neighborhood that provides quality living conditions in a safe environment; basic goods and services to local residents and employees; opportunities for business growth and future employment; green spaces for recreational pursuits and aesthetic appeal; energy conscious development; an attractive neighborhood for visitors and future investors; all in an area that welcomes a diverse group of residents and businesses alike.

The benchmarked projects in this document identify actions for positive change based upon the priorities identified during the strategic planning process. The information provided in each benchmarked project gives community leaders a guide for implementation and resources. This plan should be continually updated as progress on identified projects is made and issues affecting the South End change.

FUNDING SOURCE

To fund the City of Cortland's South End Strategic Plan project, a request of \$14,400 in grant funds was made to the Technical Assistance Program of the New York State Governor's Office for Small Cities (now known as the Office for Small Cities). These funds were awarded to the City in the fall of 2005. The City provided \$9,600 worth of cash and/or in-kind services as match for the grant.

THOMA DEVELOPMENT CONSULTANTS

Thoma Development Consultants (Thoma) was hired by the City of Cortland to assist in the preparation of the plan. Additionally, Cynthia Teter, RLA, of K. Teter Consulting, assisted with the design elements of this plan and Ken Teter, P.E., of K. Teter Consulting assisted with the investigation of the neighborhood's infrastructure.

Work on the Strategic Plan began in the spring of 2006. To assure local priorities were met, it was important to provide local oversight to guide the process. Accordingly, the Mayor of the City of Cortland appointed a Steering Committee to oversee this work. This Steering Committee provided significant assistance in the development of this Plan through participation in work sessions, assisting in surveys, and guiding the direction of the Plan. Multiple avenues of participation afforded the public full opportunity for citizen participation.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the year 2007, the City of Cortland South End Neighborhood is at a crossroads. Once an area consisting of homegrown industries which paid a decent living wage, an active railroad that brought Cortland products to distant markets, and modest owner occupied housing serviced by local mom and pop stores, the neighborhood has been in a downward spiral for more than two decades. As the industrial economy of the City collapsed and the automobile replaced the railroad as the major form of transportation in the country, the City of Cortland has been on the losing end of the struggle to replace the lost industrial jobs that provided adequate pay and fringe benefits. Compounding this struggle are the high taxes, energy costs, and the overall higher cost of doing business in the Northeast. While the City's population continues to dwindle, its poverty rate continues to rise, an indication that many of those who have chosen to stay are the elderly who live on fixed incomes or those who lack the financial wherewithal to leave.

Nowhere in the City has this economic demise been more evident than in the South End Neighborhood. Once an area where the average homeowner could literally walk across the street to get to work, as the industries and railroad closed shop, they left in their wake abandoned industrial sites and vacant buildings. Additionally, the scrap metal business that was hired to demolish the Wickwire industrial site, and which eventually owned most of the complex, began accepting toxic waste which resulted in significant developable acreage in the City being designated by the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency as a Superfund site. It took ten years of negotiations and cleanup before this area was declared fit for redevelopment.

For the South End Neighborhood, this resulted in a classic environmental justice situation whereby residences located next to vacant or deteriorated industrial sites declined in value. These homes were then purchased at reduced costs by landlords who have engaged in a steady conversion of single family units to multi family income properties, deferred maintenance practices, and renting to lower income tenants. With neighborhood groups up in arms about the deteriorated state of the area's housing, significant increases in crime, and what was perceived as an inability by the community

to change the course of the South End's direction, the City of Cortland has committed to rallying the community in reversing the South End's downward plunge. Change must be well managed and well conceived, however, so the City realized the first step was to undertake this strategic planning process.

The City and South End Neighborhood's goal is to forge a path for the future whereby the area retains and enhances those assets that have defined its character in the past, gives hope to the community today, and lays the groundwork for future growth and opportunities.

PROCESS



II. PROCESS

STEERING COMMITTEE

The Steering Committee, created by the City of Cortland, was composed of representatives with ties to the South End Neighborhood, including the Mayor, the ward alderman from the City's Common Council representing the area, a City Planning Board member, the County's Planning Director, a City police officer, the principal of the nearby Randall Elementary School, the head of the City's Code Enforcement Office, business and property owners in the South End, and residents of the area. The Committee designed the Strategic Plan, in part, by guiding the process through consultation, participation, public outreach, discussion and articulation of possibilities. The Steering Committee meetings also served as a setting for developing the common objectives and strategies that were ultimately detailed in the Plan. Membership of the City of Cortland South End Neighborhood Strategic Plan Steering Committee was as follows:

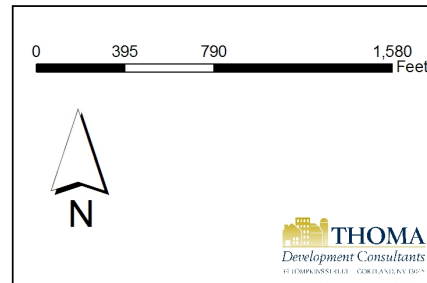
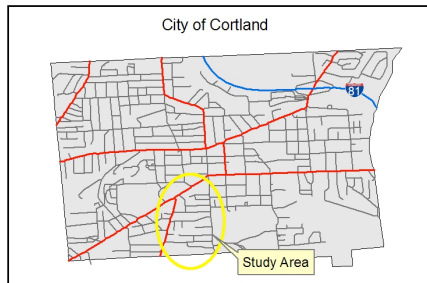
Tom Gallagher, Mayor
Dan Quail, 5th Ward City Alderman
Dan Dineen, Director, County Planning
Howard Lieberman, City Planning Board
Chuck Glover, Asst. Chief, City Code
Enforcement

Lt. Jon Gesin, Cortland City Police
Cliff Kostuk, Principal, Randall School
David McNeil, PropertyOwner/Developer
Ken Demunn, Business Owner
Sam Ferro, Resident
Bonnie Quackenbush, Resident

STUDY AREA

The City of Cortland's South End Neighborhood is bounded by Denti Way on the south, the intersection of Tompkins and Main Streets to the north; "South" Main Street to the east and Reynolds and Owego Streets to the west. (It should be noted that South Main Street is a local reference to that portion of Main Street south of the Tompkins Street intersection, however, the legal name of the street is Main Street). A map outlining the study area boundaries follows on page 4A.

City of Cortland, South End Neighborhood Study Area



STUDY METHODOLOGY

An important component of this planning process is to include a review of other relevant planning processes that have taken place, to ensure consistency among the various plans. These are:

A. Previous Planning Efforts

City of Cortland Master Plan (1989) - The City of Cortland's Master Plan was completed in 1989 and has not been updated since that time. Given the age of the document and the reordering of priorities for land use in the City, the document is due for updating. (At the time this Strategic Plan was being prepared, in late December of 2006 the City received word that it was awarded NYS Department of State Quality Communities funds to update its Comprehensive Plan). Portions of the Plan, however, remain relevant. The 1989 Master Plan was completed with input from neighborhood planning groups representing each ward of the City. The City's South End is located entirely within Ward 5. In 1989, the neighborhood planning group for the 5th Ward put forth the following recommendations for their neighborhood and the City in general:

1. Efforts must be undertaken to provide absolute control in locating business, industry, and housing in areas that affect our water, land, and natural resources. A new Master Plan needs to be developed by Cortland County. Emergency programs need to be put into place to respond to industrial accidents.
2. In recognition of the importance of jobs to the City, the City's Master Plan design should consider a reevaluation of the zoning to make more effective use of the land in the City for business development. Higher paying employment should be considered. The zoning near the 5th Ward railroad line may be an area of concern.
3. Planning should be undertaken to control the density of the population and the density of industrial workers so that greater life will be given to streets, walks, and bridges. An evaluation should be made of traffic patterns and the conversion of two-way streets to one-way.
4. The major peril to the water supply comes from other municipalities. The Cortland community must address the issue of City industry that poses a threat to contaminate our water and clean air. No nuclear waste of any kind should be located in Cortland County that will endanger our sources of water. A strong regulatory Master Plan must address this issue.
5. The Master Plan must be absolute in directing the development of multi-occupant dwellings, protecting the integrity of one-family and two-family streets, removing the blight of over occupied dwellings, and insisting on policies that enhance the beauty, peace, and quiet of neighborhoods.

6. The Master Plan should include measures to improve the appearance of our neighborhoods. Consideration must be given to a tax incentive home improvement program.
7. There should be greater enforcement of the sale and consumption of liquor.
8. Absolute enforcement of all ordinances and zoning laws.

Cortland County Consolidated Plan - The contents of a Consolidated (Housing) Plan are dictated by the federal government. The prescribed outline encourages a community to take a hard look at its housing issues such as its owner-occupied and income property housing stock, housing affordability, accessibility, safety, and a myriad of other housing-related concerns. Cortland County, and a number of other County municipalities and housing agencies, believed they were at a disadvantage in competing for housing funds without a housing plan. Therefore a Consolidated (Housing) Plan was commissioned in 2002. Each municipality and major housing provider in Cortland County was solicited for input into the Plan and a series of public meetings were held. Regarding the City of Cortland, it was noted that the 60% of the City's housing stock was constructed prior to 1939 and 75% was constructed prior to 1950 (Source: 2000 Census). The typical City structure is a late 19th/early 20th century two-story wood frame structure. Many of these larger homes have been converted to multi-family apartment houses. The City's population is economically disadvantaged, with one in four persons living below the poverty line and 52% living at or below 80% of the County's median income. With an aging housing stock and many lower income residents, the City's housing is deteriorated. The Consolidated Plan notes that an estimated 65-75% of the housing stock is in substandard condition.

The Consolidated Plan recommendations call for the rehabilitation of the City's existing housing, including both owner occupied and rental housing. More aggressive code enforcement should be undertaken to maintain housing units as "standard". Homeownership opportunities should be sought, especially since the City of Cortland has more renter housing units than owner-occupied. The Plan further recommends seeking ways to keep housing affordable; increasing rental and ownership opportunities for the middle class population; cultivating improved tenant/landlord relationships; and developing a stronger working relationship between the City and SUNY Cortland with respect to off campus housing.

B. Visioning Sessions

The City of Cortland held four public Visioning Workshops. All visioning meetings were held in Randall Elementary School, within walking distance of the South End Neighborhood. The first two public meetings focused on introducing the strategic planning process to the South End, although all City residents were encouraged to attend. The first two meetings were held on consecutive days, at different times of the day, to accommodate the schedules of as many people as possible. The dates were August 15 and 16, 2006. Approximately 60 people attended the meetings and

participated in the visioning exercises. In an open session, participants were asked to list important attributes of the neighborhood (positive and negative) and then envision positive attributes that the neighborhood would have in the future. Once these lists were generated, participants then voted to indicate which attributes should be considered a priority or, in the case of negative attributes, were the most pervasive. The results of these exercises for those topics receiving the most votes follow. The full listing of identified attributes can be found in Section VIII, Appendices. The goal of the meetings was to gather information that would contribute to the overall vision for the neighborhood.

Introduction to the Strategic Plan Meeting - August 15, 2006

Positive Attributes Receiving the Most Votes (including number of votes)

- Beaudry Park/Youth Bureau are wonderful assets (9)
- Good neighbors take care of their properties (7)
- The street reconstruction project has been a plus (6)
- The neighborhood is happy to have its "own" police officer (6)
- People are excited about the Housing Visions project (6)
- The Third Rail has the potential to be a neighborhood asset (6)
- There are good restaurants in the area (5)
- The demolition of the old Wickwire building was positive (5)
- The City has been responsive to the needs of the South End (5)
- There are great businesses in the South End (4)
- Public transportation is accessible in the South End (4)
- Media coverage of the South End has been favorable (4)

Negative Attributes Identified

- There is no grocery store in the South End (13)
- The new lighting on South Main needs to extend to high school (8)
- There are too many drug dealers in the neighborhood (7)
- Absentee landlords (7)
- Properties not taken care of/lack of pride (7)
- More businesses are needed (6)
- There are intimidating people sitting on front porches (6)
- Parking on front lawns (6)

The South End of the Future

- Safe
- Full of respect: for others and property
- More trees
- Well maintained
- Lower density of development
- Appealing to a wide diversity of people
- Quiet
- Green energy homes
- Affordable housing
- More public transportation
- Welcoming
- A diversity of businesses
- Handicapped accessible businesses
- Loft apartments for young professionals
- A mixture of development; low environmental impact of businesses
- Well lit
- A walkable community
- A coordinated transportation network including cars, pedestrians, wheelchairs, and baby strollers which is available in the right-of-way

Introduction to the Strategic Plan Meeting - August 16, 2006

Positive Attributes Receiving the Most Votes (including number of votes)

- Neighborhood pride (20)
- Increased police presence works (17)
- Beaudry Park (13)
- We have a good police department (13)
- The new street, curbs, and sidewalks on South Main (12)
- Efforts to improve area housing (9)
- Development opportunities (9)
- The City's involvement with the South End (9)
- There is a core group of active neighbors (9)
- New lights on South Main Street (7)
- The quality of the residents (7)
- New commercial enterprises (6)

Negative Attributes Identified

- Noise and traffic late at night (18)
- Absentee landlords (18)
- Poor housing conditions (16)
- Lack of police presence (13)
- Personal safety when walking in the neighborhood (13)
- Poor quality of life due to gangs and fighting (12)
- Loitering (12)
- Speeding around the entrance to the high school on South Main Street (8)
- Lack of communication from property owners (8)
- The disconnect between Main Street and South Main Street (7)
- Lack of code enforcement (6)
- Too much student housing (6)

The South End of the Future

Businesses:

- More employment for individuals
- A new grocery store
- A coffee shop
- A new gas station
- A family type business
- A new restaurant
- A new laundromat

Housing:

- Newly renovated homes
- More single family homes
- More homeownership opportunities
- More responsible tenants
- Tax incentives for property owners

Parking:

- Better signage
- More parking

Infrastructure:

- Renovated side streets
- Lights continued throughout the neighborhood
- Curbs on all streets

Sense of Neighborhood:

- A new community center
- A community garden
- More South End community events
- All basic needs served

Sidewalks:

- All streets will have sidewalks
- There will be incentives for keeping sidewalks up
- Sidewalks will be in better condition
- There will be better handicapped accessibility

Housing Meeting - September 20, 2006

The next public meeting was held on September 20, 2006 and concentrated on the issue of housing in the South End Neighborhood. A group of panelists, including Bernie Thoma, representing the City's Office of Community Development; Ben Lockwood of Housing Visions, a non-profit housing developer; Glenn Goldwyn, Director of the Cortland Housing Authority; and Asst. Chief Chuck Glover, Director of the City's Code Enforcement Office spoke to an audience of approximately 20 persons. Mr. Thoma spoke about the funding for the strategic plan and how the City might apply for Community Development Block Grant and other funds in the future to address the South End's deteriorated housing. He also spoke about grant programs that encourage first-time homeownership and how these might be utilized in the neighborhood. Ben Lockwood spoke about Housing Visions and its recent capture of NYS Housing Trust fund dollars to purchase and rehabilitate, or demolish and build new, housing in the South End. Housing Visions will purchase six structures containing 35 units (further detailed in *Section III, Historical Perspective*). Glenn Goldwyn spoke about the beginnings of the Cortland Housing Authority, their role in managing many of the City's federally subsidized housing units (including a duplex on South Avenue), and in managing the Section 8 Housing Choice voucher program. Lastly, Asst. Chief Chuck Glover spoke about the property maintenance code, what actions his department could legally undertake in addressing code concerns, and his frustrations with dealing with the judicial system. He stated the City could investigate establishing a housing court to deal with code issues.

Design Meeting - October 4, 2006

A fourth public meeting was held on October 4, 2006 and approximately 15 audience members listened to Cindy Teter, Registered Landscape Architect, speak about the unique opportunity that exists in the South End because four significant parcels in the heart of the neighborhood, the old Wickwire site, the former Potter Paint site, the lot next to Coffee Mania on South Avenue, and a portion of the Noss Technology Park are available for development at the same time. She spoke about the importance of maintaining/creating green space in the neighborhood, insisting on design elements that blend with the desired character, and creating a more walkable community. More detailed information on the future design of the South End can be found in *Section V, Neighborhood Design* of this plan. The audience was able to comment on her design ideas. They agreed that the area could be more walkable with respect to both improved sidewalks and the creation of more off-street walking paths. They liked the idea of creating a new use for the vacant lot on South Avenue such as a community garden or farmers market.

C. Steering Committee Meetings

Steering Committee members were apprised of all public meeting dates and were encouraged to attend them. In addition to the public meetings, the Steering Committee met on a number of occasions to compose a vision statement, review pertinent data culled from the surveys and the public meetings, and to engage in a

number activities aimed at identifying their own perceptions regarding the South End Neighborhood.

The Steering Committee developed the following vision statement, which is the focus of the suggested actions in this plan and serves as a shared sense of direction for future neighborhood decisions.

The South End of Cortland will be a neighborhood where attractive residences and vibrant businesses co-exist. Its historic atmosphere will be preserved, while providing residents with well managed parks and green spaces, as well as a place for residents to gather for community events. The South End will welcome a diversity of people to a walkable community that meets its residents' needs by maintaining a small town atmosphere.

Mental Mapping

A mental map is a person's perception of the world or community in which they live that is physically drawn through a thought process. The philosophy behind mental mapping is that there are elements in the natural and built environments that stand out in any person's mind. The Steering Committee participated in a mental mapping exercise to identify objects that evoke strong images of the South End Neighborhood. Participants were given 20 minutes to draw what stood foremost in each committee member's mind regarding the South End, and approximately where each feature was located on the map, although detail to scale was not emphasized. The maps were then used as a focus for group discussion.

After the group discussion was completed, observations were subsequently made by Thoma Development staff who then categorized the objects drawn into paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks. Most maps were drawn with an automobile oriented perspective, as nine out of ten participants drew roads to orient themselves. South Main Street was usually the center or focus of maps. A total of eight out of ten maps identified the railroad as a feature in the South End. Only one participant out of ten drew sidewalks. The sidewalks that were drawn were the new sidewalks on South Main Street and the sidewalk that leads into Beaudry Park. There were no other paths identified through this exercise.

The mental mapping exercise allowed participants to define their own boundaries for the South End even though this plan has defined geographic boundaries. Distinguished edges in this neighborhood include the railroad tracks, which generally separated a level of detail on some maps. More detail was shown north of the railroad on several maps, where less detail was shown south of the railroad tracks. Beaudry Park was identified by six people that participated in the exercise, which served as the southern edge of the neighborhood. Participants also identified Tompkins and Owego Streets as edges in the exercise. Some boundaries were fuzzy once they attempted to stray from drawing familiar objects on South Main Street.

Three districts were identified, which include vacant industrial land, residential areas, and commercial development along South Main Street. These districts exist on a

sporadic basis throughout the study area. Several participants identified residential areas that were in either good condition or in need of rehabilitation. Rundown housing exists on South Main Street, South Avenue, and Argyle Place according to five out of ten participants. The vacant industrial areas were labeled as “potential development”, showing there is room for improvement within the neighborhood.

The most common features that were drawn on mental maps were the landmarks. Specific establishments that were identified include JTS Lumber, Cayuga Press, Third Rail building on South Avenue, Noss Technology Park, the former Clocktower site, Web Clothes, the vacant Wickwire site, the former Potter Paint site, and lastly Beaudry Park.

Photo Exercise

The Steering Committee also participated in a photography exercise. Using disposable cameras, they were given instructions to take pictures throughout the South End Neighborhood that portrayed a positive image of the area, as well as visual representations that did not bode well for the South End. The committee convened and split into three groups to discuss the photos they had taken. They shared their observations, thoughts, and feelings with other group members. Upon the mutual decision of the group, they pasted the “best” of the negative and positive images on poster boards and then each group shared their pictures with the rest of the Steering Committee. It was noted that some of the “best” of what the South End had to offer was usually photographed by a large percentage of persons on the Steering Committee. This included well-kept houses and businesses and the reconstruction project on South Main Street. Most viewed the old Third Rail



building as a “diamond in the rough”, meaning that although it is in poor condition, its unique architecture and subsequent rehabilitation could help to transform the neighborhood due to its central location. With regard to negative images, the poor condition of residential and commercial buildings was by far and away the most pervasive negative physical feature of the neighborhood.

D. Surveys

Residents' Survey

Thoma Development Consultants conducted three mail surveys for the South End Neighborhood Strategic Plan. The first survey was sent to all identified households in the target area. The survey included a number of household demographic questions such as tenure of the unit, size of the household, age of the occupant, and whether or not the household was headed by a single female. This was followed by a series of questions meant to gauge the respondent’s attitude towards conditions in the South End.

Finally, a number of open-ended questions were posed to allow the respondent to further explain his or her feelings regarding certain conditions or their hopes for the future. A total of 363 surveys were mailed and 106 were returned, a 29% response rate. Some of the survey highlights are listed following. The full survey results can be viewed in *Section VIII, Appendices*.

OVERALL NEIGHBORHOOD PERCEPTION

- 60% of survey respondents believe their neighborhood has become a less desirable place to live since they moved there.

HOUSING

- 43% of respondents think that housing is the #1 neighborhood problem. This is followed by illegal drug use (39%) and excessive noise (29%).
- 78% of respondents believe that poor housing conditions exist in the neighborhood. Drug dealing was next at 59% and noise at 57%.
- 53% of respondents strongly disagree that landlords take care of their properties.

SELECTED DEMOGRAPHICS

- 60% of respondents own their home and 40% rent. 40% of the homeowners are aged 65 or older. 24% of the renters are age 26 to 35 and an additional 24% are age 56 to 64.
- 46% of respondents are single female heads of household. 57% of these women are age 56 or older. 37% are age 65 and older.
- 76% of the renter households have lived in the neighborhood for less than 5 years. 58% of the homeowners have lived in the neighborhood for more than 20 years. 47% of the homeowners have lived there more than 30 years.

SERVICES

- 40% of respondents strongly disagree that there are enough stores in the neighborhood. 40% strongly disagree that they can walk to the stores to get what they want.

CRIME

- 46% of respondents strongly disagree that they feel safe walking at night in the neighborhood. 50% of respondents want better sidewalks and lighting and 42% want more police protection.

JOBS

- 48% of respondents believe more jobs would improve their neighborhood.

Business/Building Owners Survey

Another survey was conducted that solicited opinions from South End building and business owners. A total of 16 responses were received out of a mailing of 49 businesses (33%). Some of the more frequent comments included the poor condition of the South End's buildings, the lack of police presence, and the poor behavior of some local residents. A few noted that the South End has great potential. The responses can be viewed in *Section VIII, Appendices*.

Building Conditions Surveys

Thoma Development Consultants also conducted exterior inspections of all buildings in the study area. The results of these inspections are included following in the *Building Conditions* section of *Part IV, Existing Conditions and Analysis*.