



*Housing
and
Neighborhoods*

8

Housing and Neighborhoods

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8.0 Housing and Neighborhoods

8.1 OVERVIEW

***Priority Action Program:
Housing and Neighborhoods***

- Initiate a Neighborhood Conservation Program, including a collaborative process to develop Neighborhood Improvement Plans

Amherst has a variety of neighborhoods and housing types reflecting the development of the Town through the 20th century. Affordable housing is an important issue in the Town. In 2000, the median value of owner occupied housing was \$116,400, almost \$30,000 more than in Erie County as a whole. Median rental unit costs were also more expensive in Amherst than in Erie County by over \$150 a month.

Based on the 2000 Erie County median family income of \$49,490, approximately 23% of Amherst's families are classified as low income (i.e., having annual incomes 80% or less of the County's median income). Housing affordability can affect others as well, including the elderly, college students, and some middle income families. In 2000, 20.4% of Amherst's owner-occupied households and 40% of renter-occupied housing units spent over 30% of their household income on housing expenses, a level considered burdensome according to Department of Housing and Urban Development standards.

Housing diversity is also a significant issue in Amherst, from the standpoint of affordability and due to the potential effects of new development on the character and stability of Amherst's neighborhoods. In recent decades, the predominant trend has been a conversion of open space and vacant lands into single-family homes, resulting in a more suburban setting throughout the Town compared to traditional neighborhoods like Eggertsville, Snyder, and Williamsville. More recently, there has been a pronounced increase in the amount of multi-family housing, largely to accommodate the demand for off-campus housing by UB students. Multi-family units accounted for 76% of new housing in the 1990s.

While not currently a major problem, the deterioration of homes is a potential future threat to the stability of Amherst's older neighborhoods. A substantial proportion of Amherst's housing stock was built prior to 1970 and will be 50 years or older by 2020, the approximate time horizon of the Plan. This trend will create the potential for an increase in the number of substandard housing units, particularly if owners lack the means to make the proper investments in property maintenance and repairs.

8.2 GOALS, OBJECTIVES, AND POLICIES

GOALS

Decent and affordable housing choices available to all residents

Healthy and diverse neighborhoods, including conserved and revitalized older parts of Amherst

OBJECTIVES

- Ensure the availability of housing affordable to all socioeconomic groups in Amherst
- Promote a diverse housing stock, with higher density housing focused on mixed-use activity centers
- Implement a coordinated program to conserve and revitalize Amherst's neighborhoods

POLICIES

A. Affordable Housing

Ensuring that affordable housing is available to all residents is a priority of the Town of Amherst. Due to the large number of residents who pay high housing costs relative to their income levels, the Town should support all initiatives that increase affordable housing.

8-1 Continue existing housing policies that promote home ownership and affordability.

The Consolidated Plan prepared by the Amherst Cheektowaga Tonawanda Consortium in 2000 identifies a number of policies that should aid in improving the affordability of housing in Amherst. One priority of the Consolidated Plan states that the Consortium should encourage maintenance of an adequate supply of standard affordable existing and new rental housing, especially for the elderly. To accomplish this, the Plan recommends rehabilitating substandard housing units and replacing uninhabitable units through the construction of affordable housing for low to moderate-income households. In 2000, approximately 9% of Amherst's occupied housing units were found to be in substandard condition and nearly all were considered suitable for rehabilitation.

Another priority of the Consolidated Plan is to provide and promote homeownership assistance for low-income families and first time homebuyers. The Town presently uses programs such as the HOME Investment Partnership Program to provide assistance to low-income families seeking to purchase and rehabilitate a home. It also provides funding for counseling and training new homebuyers. Amherst has applied for and received its third Federal Home Loan Bank Affordable Housing Grant. This 2003-04 funding, using more flexible income guidelines, is available in the form of grants providing

***Vision Statement Directions:
Housing and Neighborhoods***

- Healthy, livable neighborhoods
- Range of housing choices in urban, suburban, and rural settings

closing cost assistance to a greater number of low to moderate income applicants wishing to purchase a home in the Town. Additional funds will be available to lower income families to help them receive a more affordable mortgage rate within the Town.

Amherst also has a home resale program for first time homebuyers. Most often this program buys one and two-family homes and rehabilitates them for future resale. The intent is to maintain the rate of owner occupancy in Amherst.

Amherst should further promote the priorities of the Amherst Cheektowaga Tonawanda Consortium Consolidated Plan. In addition, Amherst should educate the public about the need for affordable housing and the impact of not providing housing opportunities for lower income families and first time buyers. Many of the policies of this chapter are intended to increase the diversity of housing in Amherst, which will also serve to promote more affordable housing. The Town should inform the public of the connection between its housing diversity initiatives and housing affordability.

B. Housing Diversity

The Comprehensive Plan Vision Statement speaks of the need to offer a range of housing choices in urban, suburban, and rural settings. Preserving and providing a variety of housing opportunities will maintain the quality and stability of existing neighborhoods while increasing housing affordability. To ensure that housing development and redevelopment complement rather than detract from established residential areas, standards and criteria addressing location and quality are an important part of this strategy.

8-2 Promote the development of a variety of housing types.

Approximately two-thirds of Amherst’s current housing stock consists of single-family detached homes, with the remainder comprised of a mix of duplexes, townhouses, apartments, and other living arrangements (e.g., dormitories and assisted living).

Recent housing development has consisted mostly of multi-family units and single-family detached, suburban subdivisions. Demographic trends will reinforce the need for a more diverse housing stock to accommodate groups such as the elderly, empty nesters, and students. As previously noted, housing diversity enhances affordability and, if properly managed, can contribute to neighborhood stability and character. Older neighborhoods like Eggertsville, for example, could benefit from decreasing household sizes and the increasing appeal of traditional development, which make smaller homes in pedestrian-oriented neighborhoods more attractive.

The Town should encourage the proportional development of diverse housing types and price levels, including single-family detached (at a variety of lot sizes), townhouses, condominiums, apartments, and housing as part of mixed-use developments. Higher density housing should be located to complement established residential areas through appropriate standards for location and design (see Policies 8-3 and 8-5).

8-3 Encourage higher density residential uses in mixed-use developments and other appropriate locations.

During the 1990s, approximately two-thirds of new housing constructed in Amherst consisted of multi-family housing, indicating a shift away from the historic pattern of predominantly single-family development. While this trend has generated concerns regarding the impacts of multi-family development on the single-family character of the Town, two major points should be noted. First, even if the current rate of multi-family development were to continue in the future, Amherst will remain a predominantly single-family community. In fact, current market conditions and the decreasing amount of available land make it unlikely that the current rate will continue. Second, if properly managed, higher density housing will contribute to achieving a number of Comprehensive Plan objectives. Examples include increasing housing diversity and affordability, decreasing automobile dependency, and reducing consumption of open space through more compact development patterns.

The Conceptual Land Use Plan (Figure 6 in Chapter 3.0) maintains Amherst’s predominantly single-family detached residential character while designating appropriate locations for higher density development (i.e., single-family attached, condominiums, and apartments). These locations are primarily focused on mixed-use centers and residential areas to include the following:

- Housing as part of mixed-use centers (e.g., apartments above ground floor retail or offices)
- Higher density housing next to commercial centers
- Mixed developments designed to integrate single-family with other housing types

Establishing higher density residential uses in these locations will decrease the potential impacts of development on sensitive lands and promote housing affordability and diversity. Providing housing in conjunction with commercial and retail centers will also decrease automobile dependency. Incorporation into mixed-use activity centers will help maintain and reinforce the character of established neighborhoods. In some areas, redevelopment of obsolete commercial and other properties for multi-family use could

The Conceptual Land Use Plan focuses **higher density housing** on mixed-use activity centers.

contribute to neighborhood revitalization. Land Use and Development Policy 3-1 further addresses the potential for high-density residential development as part of mixed-use activity centers.

8-4 Work with UB to establish mixed-use centers around the periphery of both campuses.

The growth in the number of students at UB's North Campus is generating increased demand both for on-campus housing and for off-campus rental housing in the area around the North Campus. At the same time, the shift in the core of the University from the South to the North Campus is affecting residential areas in southwest Amherst that contain a high proportion of student rental housing.

The Town should work with UB to accommodate demand for student housing in mixed-use centers located near both campuses. In addition to enhancing housing diversity and affordability, this strategy would help reduce automobile traffic, enhance the sense of community for the students, and better incorporate the North Campus in particular into Amherst's community structure. The creation of such mixed-use "University-Related Centers" is more fully described in Policy 5-7 of the Economic Development Element.

Provision of new housing opportunities will be focused in the vicinity of the North Campus because it is the primary source of demand for new student housing. Student housing opportunities along the Sweet Home Corridor in the Rensch Road area, further north on Sweet Home Road across from the High School, and along Chestnut Ridge Road will assist in accommodating the demand for additional off-campus student housing. Strategies near the South Campus should focus on reinforcing the viability of existing neighborhood centers and nearby residential areas. In establishing a new mixed-use center or centers next to the North Campus, Amherst should work with UB, especially its Off Campus Housing Office, to ensure that the University's and students' special needs are met. Retail and dining establishments catering to students as well as town residents should be encouraged. The area should be designed to be pedestrian-friendly so that students can walk or bike safely to school. The Town and UB should work with the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority to ensure that neighborhood centers are served by the bus system and to provide shuttle service from nearby neighborhoods to the University.

Lastly, the new housing opportunities provided by the centers should be listed with the Off Campus Housing Office and made available to students.

8-5 Establish standards for multi-family housing to promote high quality design and neighborhood compatibility.

Policy 8-3 addresses the need to manage the location of higher density housing to ensure that it does not negatively affect the overall character of Amherst’s neighborhoods. Equally important is the establishment of standards addressing the design and appearance of multi-family housing and its relationships to adjoining land uses. In addition to improving the quality and livability of multi-family developments for residents and improving the “fit” of these developments into the community, design standards will also help to create a more positive public perception of multi-family housing. A greater public tolerance of multi-family housing will ultimately aid the Town in preserving open space and providing alternatives to single-family detached units that are dependent on automobile use.

Design standards should address the creation of multi-family housing via renovation or redevelopment of existing properties as well as new development. Design standards should also address the creation of multi-family housing for the elderly and other special needs residents. The standards should address all forms of multi-family housing including apartments, townhouses, and mixed-use developments. Specific direction regarding the establishment of standards for multi-family development is provided in Land Use and Development Policy 3-5.

C. Neighborhood Conservation

The Vision Statement identifies healthy neighborhoods, ranging in diversity from urban to suburban to rural, as key to Amherst’s quality of life. The Town’s neighborhoods are generally in good shape, with the exception of isolated pockets of substandard housing. Nevertheless, there appears to be a perception that older neighborhoods near the City of Buffalo are experiencing decline or, if they are not declining now, are likely to decline in the future. While there is no present basis to predict that significant deterioration will occur in such areas in the future, it is possible that the combination of flat housing values, an aging housing stock, deterioration in older commercial areas, and a continuing emphasis on greenfield development in the Town and surrounding communities could ultimately affect the stability of Amherst’s older neighborhoods. The following policies are directed towards maintaining the stability and viability of Amherst’s neighborhoods and the important contributions they make towards the Town’s quality of life.

8-6 Provide incentives for residential property repairs and improvements on a town-wide basis.

Present housing conditions in Amherst are generally good. According to the Amherst Cheektowaga Tonawanda Consortium Consolidated Plan, only 9% of Amherst’s current



*High quality design multi-family housing complex.
Source: www.pedbikeimages.org*

Maintaining the *stability and viability of older neighborhoods* is important to the Revitalization Key Initiative.

housing stock is in need of rehabilitation. However, more than half of Amherst’s residential structures were built between 1950 and 1979. In addition, the construction of new housing has declined significantly over the last twenty years. While currently less than 20% of the housing stock is over fifty years old, over the next 20 years a majority of the housing will cross that age threshold and comparatively few new homes will be built. This leaves the possibility of a decline in Amherst’s housing and, as a result, its neighborhoods if older housing is not maintained properly.

As one strategy to preserve the integrity and character of its neighborhoods, the Town should provide incentives for property owners to maintain and repair their homes. Incentives will promote investment in existing housing, help reduce maintenance costs, and contribute to the provision of decent, affordable housing affordable to low income families and the elderly. Potential incentives include:

- A home improvement loan program (low interest or deferred payment loans)
- Rehabilitation tax credits (see Policy 3-8 in the Land Use and Development Element)
- Housing rehabilitation grants
- Deferrals in property tax increases on value added by home improvements

The Town should continue to utilize funding programs administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the New York State Division of Housing and Community Renewal as potential funding sources for local incentive programs. HUD programs include rehabilitation and repair home loans, property improvement loans, and the HOME program. The Town should also encourage homeowners to investigate funding programs by these and other organizations. Tax incentives are also available for the rehabilitation of designated historic resources (see Policy 4-12).

8-7 Initiate a Neighborhood Conservation Program to promote revitalization of designated neighborhoods through measures such as code enforcement, capital improvements, and design standards.

Most of Amherst’s neighborhoods are in good shape, with isolated pockets of housing in need of repair. A major factor in the health of Amherst’s neighborhoods is that the housing is of a similar age. However, some older neighborhoods do exist in Amherst. In the southern portion of the Town containing the Snyder, Eggertsville, and Williamsville neighborhoods approximately 75% of the housing is over 40 years old. To address the potential for decline as greenfield development



A housing redevelopment project in Eggertsville.

A **Neighborhood Conservation Program** should be initiated to address the conservation and enhancement of targeted neighborhoods.

continues in Amherst and surrounding communities, these and other older neighborhoods could benefit from an active Neighborhood Conservation Program. This program would address the conservation and enhancement of targeted neighborhoods through such coordinated strategies as:

- Providing incentives for property repairs (Policy 8-6)
- Promoting revitalization of neighborhood commercial centers (Policy 8-8)
- Focusing code enforcement efforts on substandard properties that threaten neighborhood stability
- Making physical improvements to enhance neighborhood quality and stimulate private investment (e.g., compatible improvements to local roadways, new curbs and sidewalks, landscaping, lighting, etc.)
- Improving and developing parks, recreational, and community facilities in neighborhoods where such opportunities are deficient
- Identifying compatible development/redevelopment opportunities that would both strengthen existing neighborhoods and decrease the pressure for new greenfield development
- Instituting regulatory changes and design standards to protect and enhance neighborhood character (e.g., special overlay districts with design guidelines to preserve neighborhood character, mixed-use options to promote neighborhood-serving commercial development, street design standards to promote pedestrian accessibility)
- Encouraging neighborhood identity initiatives (e.g., neighborhood identification signs, neighborhood watch programs, community events, etc.)

The specific strategies to be applied in each neighborhood should be identified through Neighborhood Improvement Plans developed jointly by the Town and local residents (Policy 8-9). The Town could establish a neighborhood planning position responsible for working with residents, property, and business owners on the Neighborhood Improvement Plans, disseminating information on funding programs and incentives, assisting homeowners in applying for grants and funding, and coordinating code enforcement. In addition to identifying outside funding sources, the Town could provide funding or other resources to help implement the plans, possibly on a “match” basis with local residents or businesses.

Southeast Amherst is designated as the priority area for development of a Neighborhood Improvement Plan (see discussion of Southeast Amherst in Section 3.3., Conceptual Land Use Plan).

The condition of *older commercial areas* is important to sustain the health of the neighborhoods they serve.

8-8 Promote the revitalization of older commercial areas as a focus of neighborhood activity and include support for building and property maintenance code enforcement.

As the traditional business and retail centers of the community, older commercial areas are of major importance to the health of Amherst’s neighborhoods. Decline in commercial areas affects the visual appearance and image of the Town and possibly deters investment in nearby residential areas. Revitalizing these areas and reinforcing their traditional role as retail and employment centers with residential uses nearby will stimulate business and investment and provide centers of activity for surrounding neighborhoods.

A number of strategies are available to improve the viability and attractiveness of older commercial areas. Improved street and sidewalk layouts can increase accessibility while maintaining pedestrian character, making the commercial area more appealing to surrounding residents. Building code enforcement can help prevent deterioration. Tailoring zoning requirements to the unique physical characteristics of older commercial development and encouraging the redevelopment of obsolescent properties, historic buildings, and community resources can help accommodate new viable uses (see Land Use and Development Policies 3-9 and 3-10). In addition, the Town could assist and support business owners through such measures as:

- Instituting traffic and parking studies and making the results available to business owners
- Suggesting building designs that might be most attractive to potential customers or compatible with local architecture
- Providing loans or tax incentives to business owners who upgrade their storefronts, signage, landscaping, or lighting
- Providing streetscape and landscaping improvements in commercial areas
- Providing demographic information and available market analyses to business owners so that they may better accommodate Town residents
- Promoting recently renovated commercial areas or nearby neighborhoods
- Encouraging the establishment of business improvement districts as a mechanism to finance improvements

Commercial revitalization will provide many tangential benefits. Healthy commercial centers positively affect overall neighborhood character and could encourage local residents to renovate their properties. Improving the layout of commercial areas could reduce congestion and encourage residents to walk or bike instead of driving to shops. Improved retail areas with a “village character” could become destinations attractive to

customers beyond the local neighborhoods. Strengthened commercial facilities would also increase Amherst's tax base and employment opportunities. Lastly, capitalizing on infill development and redevelopment opportunities in existing centers could reduce pressures for development of vacant lands and strip retail development. (*Amended 2-28-11; BCPA-10-1*)

8-9 Encourage participation from residents when the Town is developing action/improvement plans for specific neighborhoods.

Neighborhood needs are best determined by local residents working through a collaborative planning process. Neighborhood Improvement Plans should be a centerpiece of the Neighborhood Conservation Program (Policy 8-7). The Eggertsville Action Plan and the current plan for the Harlem-Kensington commercial area have set a precedent for such plans. In the future, the Town should establish and provide resources for a formal neighborhood planning process, encourage residents to participate in the development of Neighborhood Improvement Plans, and publicize the benefits of the program. Action plans should be developed for the oldest neighborhoods first. Ultimately, the Town should strive to have neighborhood improvement plans initiated by neighborhood residents and/or neighborhood organizations. The Town's role would be to ensure that these plans are consistent with the Comprehensive Plan while providing resources, technical assistance, and support to the neighborhoods in developing such plans.

The Neighborhood Conservation Program should be implemented through **Neighborhood Improvement Plans** developed collaboratively by local residents and the Town.

Typically, neighborhood improvement plans address issues in the following areas:

- Transportation/vehicular and pedestrian traffic
- Access to commercial and retail areas
- Community facilities and services, including parks and recreation areas
- Neighborhood conservation and beautification, including potential regulatory changes and physical improvements

However, improvement plans should be focused on residents' concerns and needs. Therefore, public participation is essential to guarantee a successful plan. The plan should be used to establish consensus on neighborhood issues, provide guidance to town officials, and establish eligibility for funding. The steps of a typical neighborhood planning process include:

- **Neighborhood Self-Evaluation:** This step involves identification of neighborhood boundaries and an assessment of neighborhood strengths, weaknesses, and issues that should be addressed in the Plan.

- ***Plan Development:*** In this step, a plan of action is developed to address the issues identified in the self-evaluation phase. To assist in this process, the Town could develop a “toolkit” of potential neighborhood improvement actions as a resource for neighborhood residents.
- ***Implementation:*** This step involves coordinated action by neighborhood residents and the Town to implement the Plan. To be successful, neighborhood plans will require the active participation of residents in activities such as fund raising, organizing special events, and mobilizing volunteers for maintenance and improvement projects. Town involvement could include actions such as regulatory changes and targeting of funds for physical improvements.

Amherst’s residents should be made aware of the incentives that are available through the neighborhood improvement planning process. Potential incentives include access to funding and loan programs, town incentives and support, and the incorporation of neighborhood concerns into town planning initiatives. The neighborhood improvement planning process will help to instill community pride, especially if residents participate in or initiate a plan for their neighborhood.

