

Audubon Development Plan Update

New Opportunities for the Audubon Community



Introduction

The Audubon Community was the first “planned community” in the Western New York Region. Initiated in the early 1970s, the community has evolved and reacted to events and trends that have indicated an opportunity to revisit plans and establish direction for the future. The Town started looking into the Audubon Community with some initial research and land use inventories in 2022. Two consultants, ConsultEcon, Inc. and Moule & Polyzoides, were retained in 2023 to assist the Town in furthering their studies. As part of this planning effort, the project consulting team undertook a review of land use and zoning in the Audubon Community. The consulting team reviewed the original Audubon Development Plan and its updates, as well as more than 20 other plans, ordinances, studies, articles, and related materials and data concerning the Audubon Community dating from the early 1970s to the present day. Future development concepts were formulated from this background information and analysis to inform this update.

The Purpose

This project intends to guide the evolution of the Audubon Community (see Figure 1), first created in 1973, into its future as the first 50 years of its inception come to a close. It presents a vision that will form the basis to update planning for this area. This planning effort has the potential to enhance the Audubon Community through investments in revitalization and economic opprotunities to strive and meet the vision for Audubon.

The following key points describe existing features that enable the Audubon Community to advance into a more robust and vibrant place for community members to live, work and enjoy.

- The area’s physical adjacency to the University at Buffalo North Campus makes it an easy living choice for university students, faculty, and staff and also makes it an ideal location to establish valuable connections between the campus and Town residents.
- It location along a major corridor from UB to the Intserstate highway system makes it highly accessible and attractive for multi-modal transportation. A possible public transit line in the area can offer an additional mobility option to reduce traffic.
- Due to office vacancy, increased demand for housing, and additional mobility options, the Audubon Parkway corridor has strong potential to become a major mixed-use corridor, connecting several existing economic centers in the broader area such as the Boulevard Central District and the University at Buffalo.
- Planning for future redevelopment that accommodates new commercial uses and a variety of housing options will enhance this area, creating a desirable “place” for new jobs and employment opportunities.
- The presence and expansion/connection of several natural assets, wetlands and creeks makes the area a great place for recreation, healthy living, and increased quality of life.

The Study Area

The 1,726-acre study area for this planning effort is framed by North French Road to the north, Ellicott Creek to the south, Sweet Home Road to the west, and Campbell Boulevard to the east (see Figure 2). The study area is bisected by Interstate Highway 990. It also includes segments of the following major corridors:

1. John James Audubon Parkway
2. North Forest Road
3. Dodge Road
4. Millersport Highway

The study area is part of the larger Audubon Community, which was formed in 1973 with the adoption of the Audubon Development Plan and the New Community District (NCD) zoning that encompasses it. Within the NCD but outside of the study area are the University at Buffalo North Campus and Nature View Park.



Figure 1: Study Area Aerial

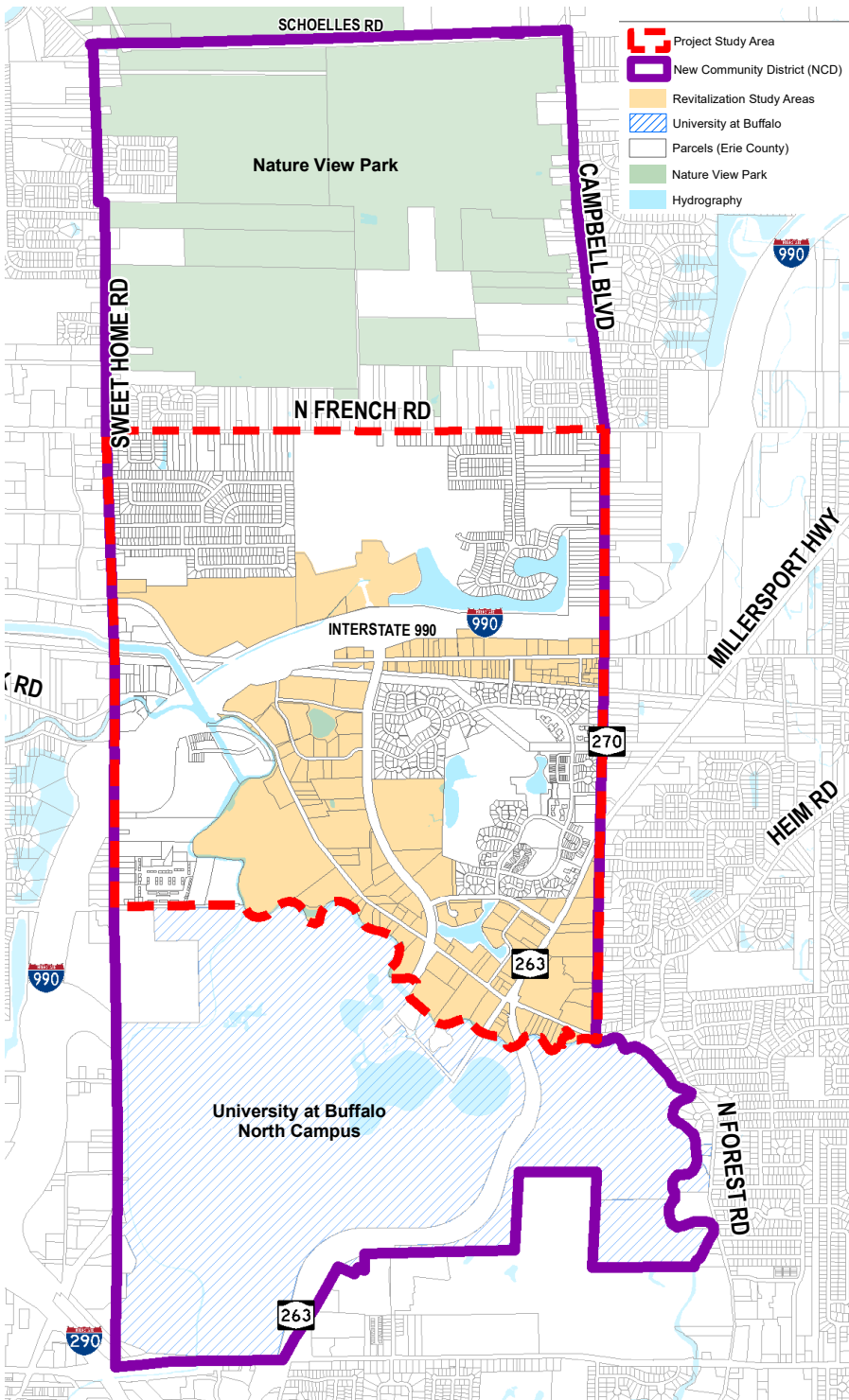


Figure 2: Study Area Context



Economic Analysis

An economic market analysis was conducted to evaluate economic and real estate market opportunities in the Audubon area. Regional economic trends such as population growth, employment rates, housing type, and household income comparisons were also evaluated to draw accurate conclusions in regard to the regional real estate market.

The evaluation found the inventory of available homes in the Audubon region to be extremely low. The majority of the housing in the Study Area was built after 1979 (see Figure 3) and is aging. There is also a higher concentration of recent multi-family housing developments in the Study Area as compared to the rest of the Town (see Figure 4). Multi-family developments continue to be constructed in the Study Area. New developments, built since 2010 have quickly achieved 97% occupancy further exemplifying the strong underlying demand for housing at both market rate and affordable price points.

Over the past several years, a robust off-campus student housing market has emerged to provide housing for the student body at the University at Buffalo. However, the University anticipates enrollment to remain constant over the next decade, and because of the recent student housing developments, the demand for student housing is estimated to be satisfied for the near future.

Other non-residential land uses such as office and retail were also evaluated. The office market vacancy rate in the area was deeply affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic and continues to trend towards higher vacancies. There are a variety of types of office space that have been met with different levels of demand from the market. Larger multi-story and smaller one-story office buildings have remained attractive to professional office users, however, larger one and two-story buildings have proven more difficult to rent. This shows the need for more variation in size and location for office space in the region.

The retail market of Western New York has a relatively high vacancy rate of 13% compared to the national average of 5%. The Boulevard region submarket, which includes the Amherst area, has higher vacancy rates than the adjacent City of Buffalo (see Figures 5 and 6). This vacancy rate is mostly attributed to the uncertain status of the Boulevard Mall but also shows the relative demand for retail redevelopment within the area. The Bouelvard area remains a strong market with continued redevelopment activity.

There is presently limited retail activity within the Study Area. Most of the existing retail development near Audubon is clustered along Millersport Highway while there is virtually no retail development along Audubon Parkway north of University at Buffalo North Campus. The economic analysis helped to inform specific market needs and identify redevelopable sites, identified on Figure 7.

Compatibility of Development

The following goals and objectives guided the proposed development intensity in this area:

- Ensure compatibility of scale and character of new development to existing single-family neighborhoods featuring buildings that are low density, not exceeding two-stories in height
- The highest intensity of new development should not exceed three stories in height and is best located either along major corridors such as Audubon Parkway or in the middle of blocks
- Along Dodge Road, multi-family housing should only be one to two stories facing Dodge Road with a three story maximum massing in the rear towards the I-990
- New development should be designed in the form of compact, walkable neighborhoods with interconnected streets and green spaces, featuring a variety of buildings to add architectural variety

In summary, this Plan calls for a responsible distribution of low-density development in the Audubon area, ranging from one to three stories, carefully calibrated to ensure compatibility with the current character in proximity to place.

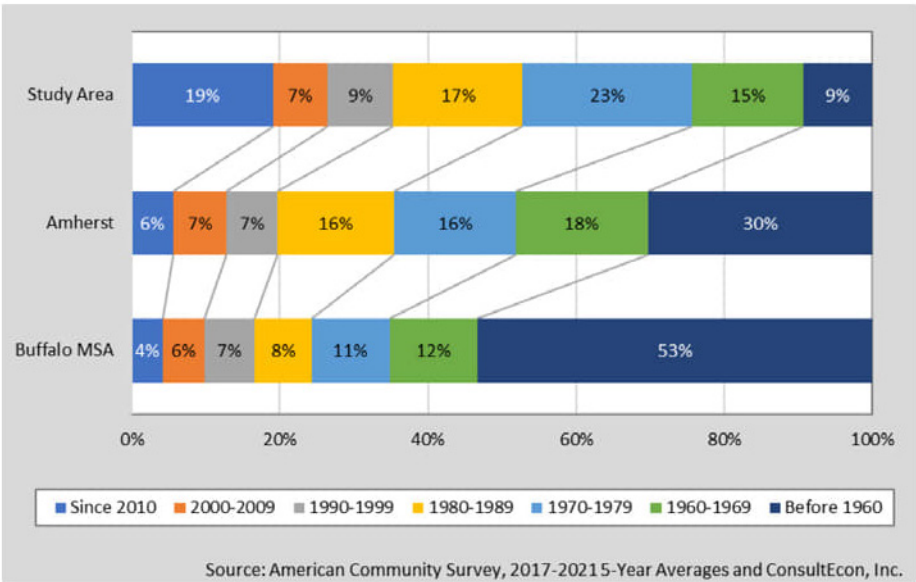


Figure 3: Age of Existing Housing (Source: ConsultEcon)

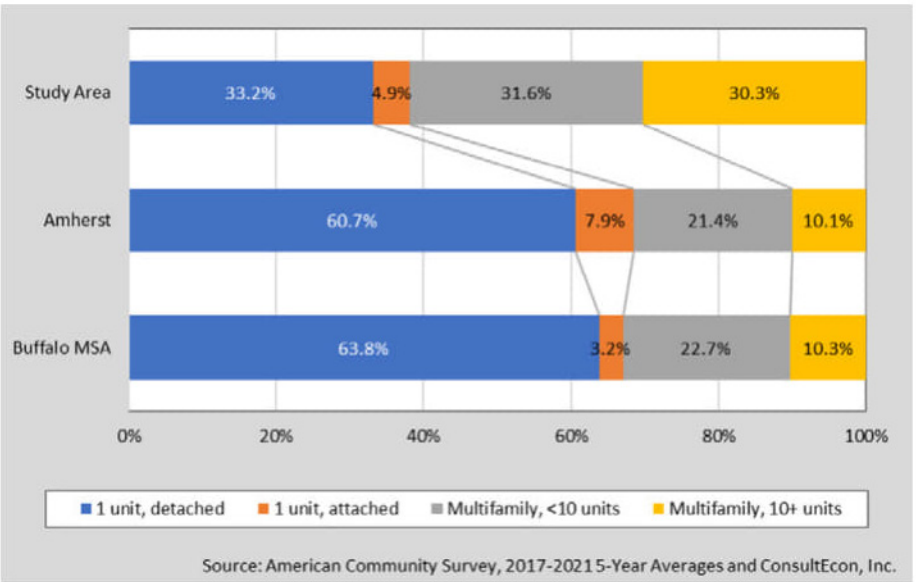


Figure 4: Unit Distribution of Existing Housing (Source: ConsultEcon)

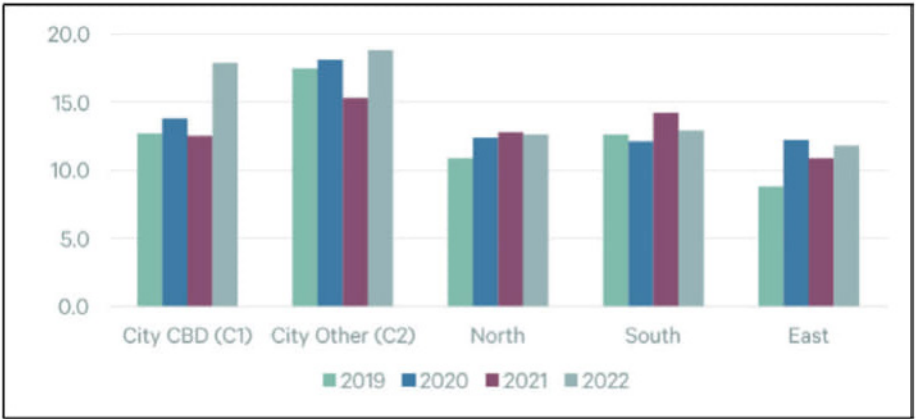


Figure 5: Buffalo Region Office Market Vacancy Rate (Source: CBRE Buffalo, Q4 2022)

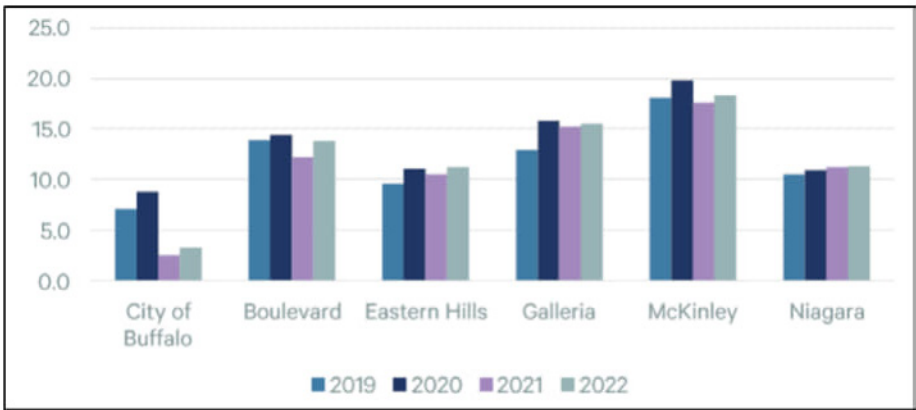


Figure 6: Buffalo Region Retail Market Vacancy Rate (Source: CBRE Buffalo, Q4 2022)



The original Audubon Development Plan introduced the concept of a planned community consisting of a mix of land uses. The current planning project reinforces and builds upon the original intent and hopes to create an enhanced legacy as a mixed-use, livable area that supports the University at Buffalo and neighborhood residents with a variety of amenities (see Figure 8).

Based on the economic analysis and ensuring compatibility with the surrounding uses, seven locations within the Study Area were identified as having reasonable potential for redevelopment or infill development (see Figure 7). These sites may not all be feasible for development due to timing, ownership, environmental constraints, or alternative uses, but they all merit future consideration:

- 1. Town of Amherst Municipal campus
- 2. West Side of John James Audubon Parkway, north of North Forest Road
- 3. West Side of John James Audubon Parkway, south of North Forest Road
- 4. Pinchot Court
- 5. Bryant Woods parcels
- 6. North Forest Road and St. Rita’s Lane
- 7. Dodge Road corridor

The for-sale residential housing market remains very strong in both the local area and the region. There is very limited inventory, and demand remains high for all types of units, regardless of size and price point. Demand for market-rate rental housing is similarly high, and not just for student housing. There is a clear need for rental housing that serves young professionals, singles, and empty nesters in smaller units, while the demand for larger units is limited to larger households. The local office market is facing an elevated vacancy rate, particularly among older, low-density buildings. There may be some demand for new office development in the area, but it will need to be focused within walkable, mixed-use environments with a high level of amenities and proximity to restaurants and retail spaces. There is very little available retail space in the Study Area. There is need for neighborhood-oriented retail and commercial uses located in proximity to both existing and future residential and office areas.



Figure 7: Potential Redevelopment Areas
(Source: ConsultEcon)



Figure 8: Potential Redevelopment Intensity
(Source: Moule & Polyzoides)



Planning for future redevelopment should also consider improvements to the public realm (see Figure 9), with focus on:

- Encouraging new development projects, informed by proposed circulation and natural assets inherent to their site, to assume their own unique character through the design of its street network, public and open spaces, building forms, and relation to its surroundings.
- Improvements to local roadways including:
 - Continuous and regular spacing of public street trees close to the curb to reduce the perceived width of the street and provide shade to pedestrians
 - Installation of sidewalks where they are missing and desired
 - Enhancing safety by providing pedestrian accommodations and reducing speed
 - Creating a better sense of walkability
- Provide for additional opportunities to enhance and infill the Municipal Center (currently housing Town Police & Court, Senior Services, and the Audubon Public Library) to contain a greater variety of uses and services



Figure 9: Public Realm Improvements
(Source: Moule & Polyzoides)



Neighborhood character is an important objective of this project as is the provision of a more walkable, pedestrian-friendly environment that is attractive and encourages more residents to walk or bike. The current physical condition of the Audubon area is auto-centric, but this planning effort seeks to transform this condition into one where the pedestrian is the priority. There are several strategies that can be applied towards making the study area more walkable. These include:

- A mix of uses that encourages interaction
- A network and variety of types of interconnected streets with sidewalks
- Carefully located retail and mixed-use centers within walking distance of residential neighborhoods
- Development blocks not exceeding 300 feet in length
- A network of trails and pathways

Proposed development should infuse these strategies with an architectural character that is unique to the Study Area. The goal is to create “places” with their own building characteristics that distinguishes the Audubon area as its own place both for residents, employees and visitors. The NCD zoning allows for flexibility in design so new development can be properly designed and scaled to accommodate this goal. The relation of buildings to streets is also key and street improvements should be designed to enhance the “places” of Audubon. The following are examples of neighborhood concepts that seek to employ these strategies (see Figure 9 for their locations).



Municipal Center Revitalization

As one of the key catalytic projects of this plan, the transformation of the Town Municipal Center site could help create a pedestrian-friendly multi-modal place as the new civic heart of the Audubon Community.

Currently, the Municipal Center has four important public buildings housing Town services, surrounding a large public parking lot. These include:

- Amherst Town Police Department
- Town of Amherst court
- Amherst center for Senior Services
- Audubon Branch Public Library

The Plan suggests an incrementally-implemented “park- once” environment within the Municipal Center. The elements of a traditional village design consist of a fine-grain mix of land uses, a network of small blocks, and design of pedestrian-friendly streets that place many destinations within easy walking distance of one another. This allows a single parking space to serve multiple destinations. Figure 10 shows one potential development concept for enhancement and redevelopment of the Town’s Municipal Center.



Figure 10: Municipal Center Draft Concept (Source: Moule & Polyzoides)



Conservation and enhancement of natural assets in Audubon focuses on the ability of ecosystems to adapt to change and to continue to supply benefits. This includes consideration of waterways and water quality, wetlands, parks and open spaces, wooded areas, and other natural assets and how they serve the community. Planning opportunities regarding conserving and enhancing valuable natural assets in the study area include:

- Conserving and enhancing natural and open spaces
- Protecting wetlands
- Creating an integrated network of open spaces
- Linking new development (where feasible) to existing bike paths or trailways
- Introducing new natrual features in existing areas and on existing and new streets
- Encouraging the use of “green infrastructure”



Freshwater Emergent Wetlands



Nature View Park



Freshwater Forested/Shrub Wetlands



Ellicott Creek



Lake La Salle



Walton Woods