3. Existing Conditions

The Snyder Business District is unique to the Town of Amherst and remains much healthier than other similar traditional business districts and residential neighborhoods throughout the region. An analysis of the area revealed a number of strengths that should be built upon. It also identified some of the challenges confronting the business district. The following findings provide a general overview of existing conditions within the Snyder Business District.

3.1 Location and Access

As they say in the real estate community, it's *"location, location, location!"* Snyder enjoys a key location near the geographic center of the Buffalo metropolitan area. It is often said that in Western New York, everything is "twenty minutes away." In Snyder that statement is especially true. Downtown Buffalo, Buffalo-Niagara International Airport, the Canadian border, Buffalo's Museum District, both campuses of the University at Buffalo, major suburban shopping areas, and even Niagara Falls, Lockport and Orchard Park are all within an easy drive. The I-290 interchanges at Main Street and Harlem/Sheridan are less than a mile from the center of Snyder, and access to the I-90 at Cleveland Drive and the Kensington Expressway (NY33) at Harlem Road are only slightly further. In addition, the community is well served by public transportation on NFTA bus routes 30, 48, and 49, which link directly to the subway at South Campus Station and to downtown Buffalo.


Regional Context Map

3.2 The Surrounding Community *(See also Section 4 - Demographic Profile)*

Snyder enjoys enviable demographics as one of the most affluent and well-educated communities in the Greater Buffalo metropolitan area. Not only do residents support their local cultural organizations, but they are also very involved in the larger Buffalo cultural scene. Many of Western New York's largest cultural institutions and attractions are well supported by the Snyder (and also Eggertsville) communities. The disposable income, education, and cultural sophistication of the Snyder community can be harnassed to help build a strong, vibrant, neighborhood business area that will attract people from throughout the region.

Despite its being one of the most densely developed within the Town of Amherst, in the larger context, the residential population density is relatively low, consisting mostly of larger, single family homes on individual lots. Although it succeeded in the past, this neighborhood population density alone may now be too low to support the kind of business district that the community envisions, especially given the regional choices for retail shopping only a short drive away. Vibrant, successful, pedestrian-oriented business areas require a fairly dense residential population living in very close proximity. Increasing both the population density near the Snyder Business District in the future and the housing options available to area residents can be accomplished with the construction of quality townhouses, row-houses or upscale low-rise (3-4 story) condominiums.
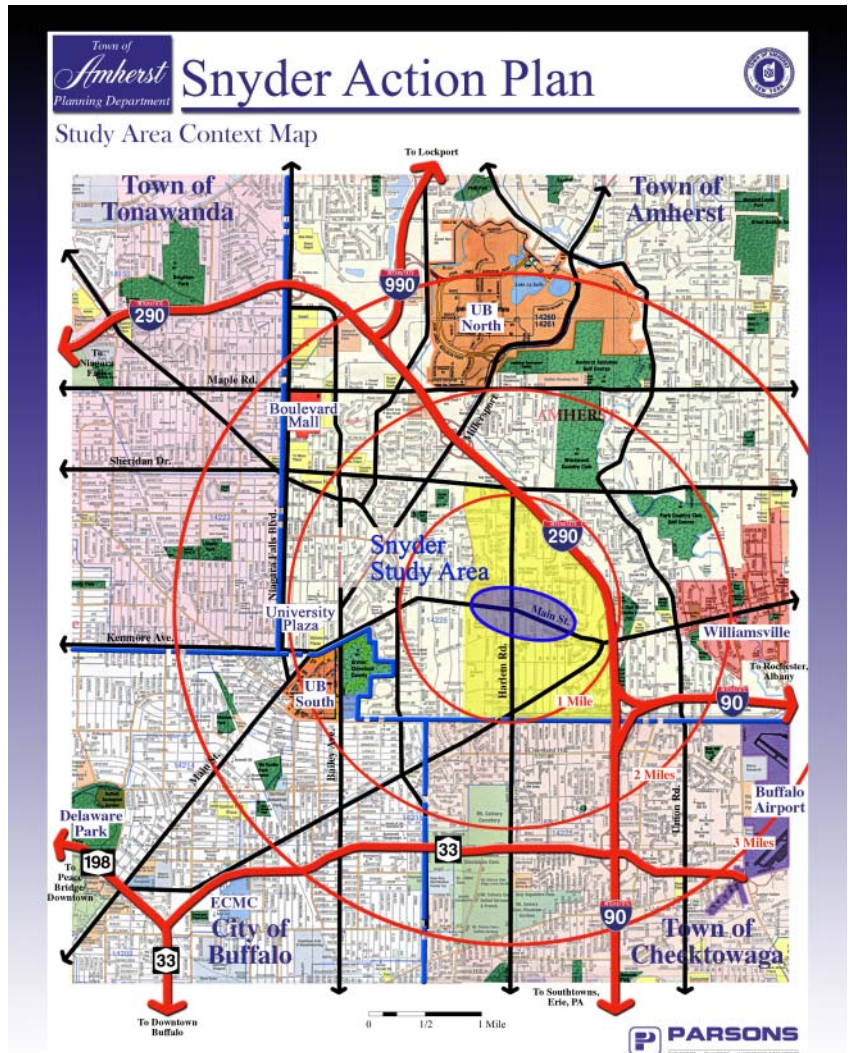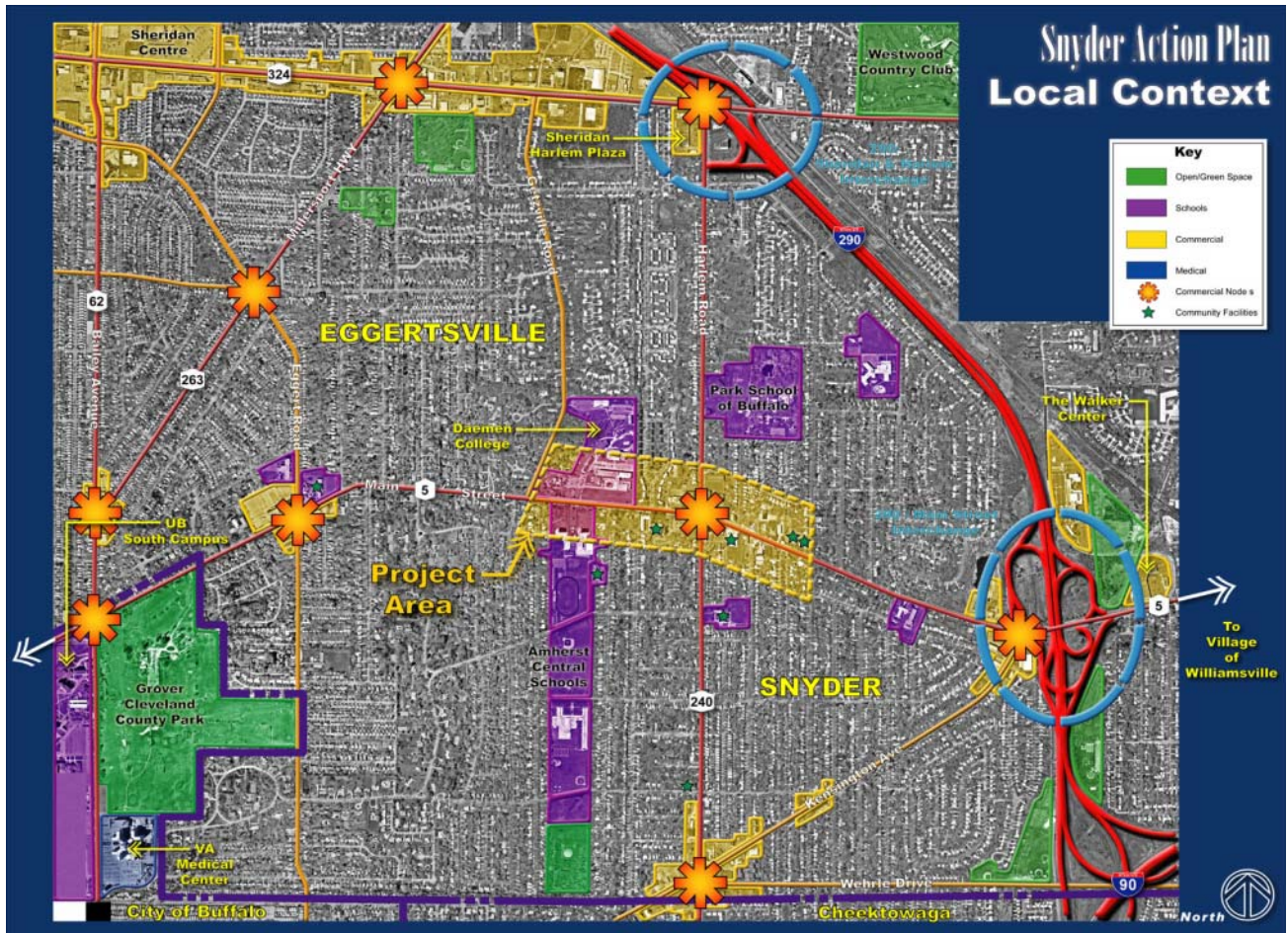
Local Area Context

Snyder Business District

3.3 Area Image /Character

Snyder began as a rural cross-roads hamlet, surrounded by farms, and the character of the community reflected that. Later it became a district of large estates lining Main Street. By the turn of the 20th century, Snyder was a stop on the inter-urban streetcar line to Williamsville and it began to develop as a "new" upper-middle class suburb. Large frame and masonry houses, most of which still exist today, lined the side streets. The houses were a pleasing mix of *"Arts-and-Crafts"* influenced design, colonial revival, tudor, and other miscellaneous housing styles. During this same period, the commercial area along Main Street saw its older, 19th century frame inns and stores replaced by traditional "Main Street USA" style masonry buildings that were built up to the sidewalk, some with Art-Deco influences. Many of the area's larger, older homes were constructed between the early 1920's and the early 1940s.

After World War II, development styles changed and the nation was no longer building traditional walkable communities. Emphasis was shifted to smaller, more affordable homes and the automobile began to be dominant on the landscape. Some of these ideas affected Snyder, as Amherst's new "sub-urban" town zoning codes (1950s, 60s, 70s) required new buildings to be set back from the street, and each building to have its own street access and on-site parking. Unfortunately, this worked against the traditional aspects that make Snyder a unique and attractive "walkable" community.

Large areas of paving and parking fronting on the street detract from the desired "village" character

The large undifferentiated paved area at the Mobil Station does not "anchor" the corner and detracts from the walkability of the community.

Siena is one of the region's premier restaurants but it sits in a "less-than-elegant" setting.

The post-war architecture was less successful at promoting a walkable, village-like, atmosphere. Today the older more traditional buildings co-exist uneasily with some of the newer structures. The character of the community also suffers because significant portions of the Snyder Business District have been "hollowed out" for parking. These two trends - increased parking areas and fewer historic structures - make Snyder less coherent and "imageable" than Ellicottville, Niagara-on-the-Lake, or even the Village of East Aurora.

3.4 Community Institutions and Amenities

Although its overall visual image could be improved, the Snyder Business District is very fortunate in that it contains many institutions that contribute to its cultural and civic identity and vitality in the area. These notable institutions include Daemen College, Amherst Central School District (High School), the Park School, MusicalFare Theater, O'Connell and Company Theater, US Post Office, YMCA-Northeast

Snyder-Eggertsville Library

Amherst Central High School

Branch, Amherst Community Church, the Eggertsville-Snyder Branch Library, Ascension Lutheran Church, and Bornhava Preschool.

3.5 Traffic and Pedestrian Safety

A very common concern voiced during project meetings or interviews with key stakeholders was that of traffic speed on Main Street. The posted speed limit through the Business District is forty (40) miles per hour, however cars routinely exceed that level, beguiled by the long wide straight-away on that portion of Main Street. This speed is generally ten (10) miles per hour faster than many other business districts and "downtown" areas. Typically a thirty (30) miles per hour speed is preferred in this type of situation. The problem of speed is exacerbated by the wide (12 foot) lanes on Main Street. These wide lanes, which are similar in size to an expressway lane, tend to encourage faster speeds and serve as a detriment to local pedestrian cross-

Wide pavement at Main and Harlem create an unfriendly environment for pedestrians

ings and the "village-like" atmosphere.

The area surrounding the Main Street-Harlem Road intersection is especially problematic for both pedestrian and vehicular traffic. As mentioned earlier, the width of the streets' pavement is an obstacle for pedestrians. The worst case scenario is Main Street on the east side of Harlem where it is essentially seven lanes wide. Also, the existing continuous right-turn lane from westbound Main Street to northbound Harlem Road is rarely used and likely not needed. This free-flowing lane adds to the excessive pavement width and is unsafe for pedestrian crossing. In addition, the numerous curb cuts, parking lot entrances, and driveway aprons in the area also are very detrimental to the pedestrian experience and contribute to a lack of feeling safe.
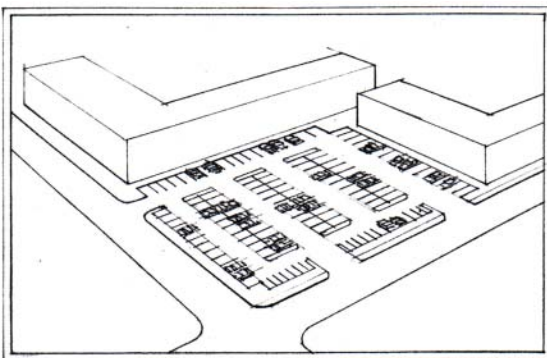
It should be noted that the signals that are present, not only at Main and Harlem but other intersections in the study area, have pedestrian crossing phases that many feel are too short to adequately cross the width Main Street, particularly for slower moving senior citizens.
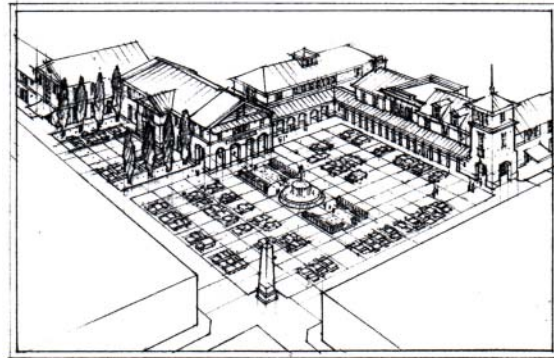
3.6 Parking

It is often stated that the downtown areas and "trendy" village districts across the country that are the most desireable to visit, are also the one's that tend to have parking issues, or at least have "invisible" parking lots. Parking is an important issue in the Snyder Business District, as it is in virtually all successful, vibrant communities. Typically, if a place is considered a "destination," people will be willing to park and walk a few steps. Anyplace that people want to visit, i.e. New York, Toronto, Ellicottville, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Elmwood Avenue, etc, parking is at a premium. But because the areas and businesses are attractive, walkable, and vibrant, people are willing to walk. The point is, you cannot have a walkable, vibrant community and always have lots of easy parking right at the front door of the business - - that kind of model is seen in the newer suburbs, in places like Sheridan Drive and Transit Road, but these places are anything but walkable and appear to cater to only cars and not people.

*Parking Lot Possibilities - Making Parking Lots Attractive
(Source: The New Urban News)*
Before   **After**

Right now, the pattern of development in Snyder is somewhere between Elmwood Avenue and Transit Road *(i.e. it has a combination of "up-to-the-sidewalk" traditional storefronts with parking on-street and behind the buildings, as well as some buildings set back from the street with parking lots in front).* The problem is that this combination does not work well under either pattern. From an "image" stand-

point, it is the mix of parking types, the large expanses of parking fronting Main Street and a lack of connectivity between the various lots that detracts from the character and "village-like" ambiance. The image below shows the extent of parking available in the Snyder Business District - - a apparent large percentage of the surface area in the district. **Yet there are good examples of successful parking management right in Snyder.** Many buildings have ample parking *behind* the buildings, which allows the buildings and street frontage to create the character for the district, rather than a "sea of asphalt" and cars. Rear parking is typical of numerous, traditional villages, including Williamsville, Kenmore, and Orchard Park, etc. The shared parking and access arrangement between the funeral home, library, and Lutheran Church is viewed as beneficial by all parties involved, makes it convenient for the area residents, and is exactly the sort of shared access and parking that should happen throughout Snyder. Another good example is the shared access between Loughran's parking lot and the parking area behind the Roth building. Adequate signage is key, however, for rear parking to be successful.

Extent of Existing Parking in Business District

It is also important to point out that under ideal access management and shared parking arrangements, that property owners can begin to share driveways (thus eliminating others), give patrons easier and safer connections between businesses, lead to potential shared maintenance and snow plowing costs, and provide additional opportunities for landscaping and beautification.

3.7 Walkability and Connectivity

As mentioned previously, Snyder retains many of the features from its initial development era that still generally make it a viable "walkable" community - - narrower neighborhood streets with continuous sidewalks, a clustering of retail/commercial uses in a relatively small area, numerous businesses fronting the sidewalk line, and a inter-connected grid of streets. However, this attribute has degraded over time. The widening of Main Street has effectively cut the community in two, making it difficult for a pedestrian to cross the wide busy thoroughfare, even at the signalized intersections. Also, newer developments such as Snyder Square, Snyder Square II, and the Palanker Building relate more to vehicular users than to pedestrian customers or the neighborhood. By offering more connectivity and comfortable access between buildings and parking lots, more customers arriving by car may be more inclined to walk to the neighboring business without the nuisance of getting back into their car.

3.8 Zoning and Regulations

Many of Snyder's physical discontinuities can be traced to Post WWII "suburban" town zoning codes. Zoning regulations in the Town of Amherst, like many suburban municipalities around the country, are set up as a "one-size-fits-all" approach. The Town of Amherst's current Zoning Ordinance dates back to 1976 (See Map, page 11). The one-size-fits-all approach means that commercial areas, whether they are newer, auto-oriented plazas on Transit Road or Sheridan Drive, or traditional retail areas like Eggertsville, Snyder, and the Village of Williamsville, were given similar requirements in terms of parking, setbacks, etc. Inevitably, over the past thirty (30) years requirements that favored easy auto access won out. In many cases the Town's current zoning code creates very few opportunities for newer "mixed-use" developments, central to the health and vibrancy of most traditional neighborhoods. The code's requirements for large front setbacks has almost forced developers to bring parking up to the street edge, thus breaking down that "traditional" business district character.

Infill development, and rehabilitation of existing properties, is particularly difficult in Snyder due to the inconsistencies between the existing zoning codes and the existing character of the surrounding community. Developers find it difficult to make their projects "fit" into the district and often shy away from community conflicts. Typically a developer in the older neighborhoods would need to acquire adjacent residential properties in order to meet the current zoning requirements for setbacks, parking, and greenspace. These developers gravitate towards the northern and eastern parts of town where larger parcels and less potential community conflict exists. It also becomes less costly for developers to build in the newer parts of town, rather than expending more energies, costs and resources trying to force a project into an older, more established neighborhood. Over the past decade, however, many places are rediscovering the value in older more traditional forms of development, before the overwhelming emphasis on the automobile. Many communities across the country are re-writing their zoning codes or altering them through area specific "overlay districts." Fortunately, the Town of Amherst, as part of its Bicentennial Comprehensive Plan, is undertaking this effort right now.

Refer to the map on the following page for the current Zoning designations.
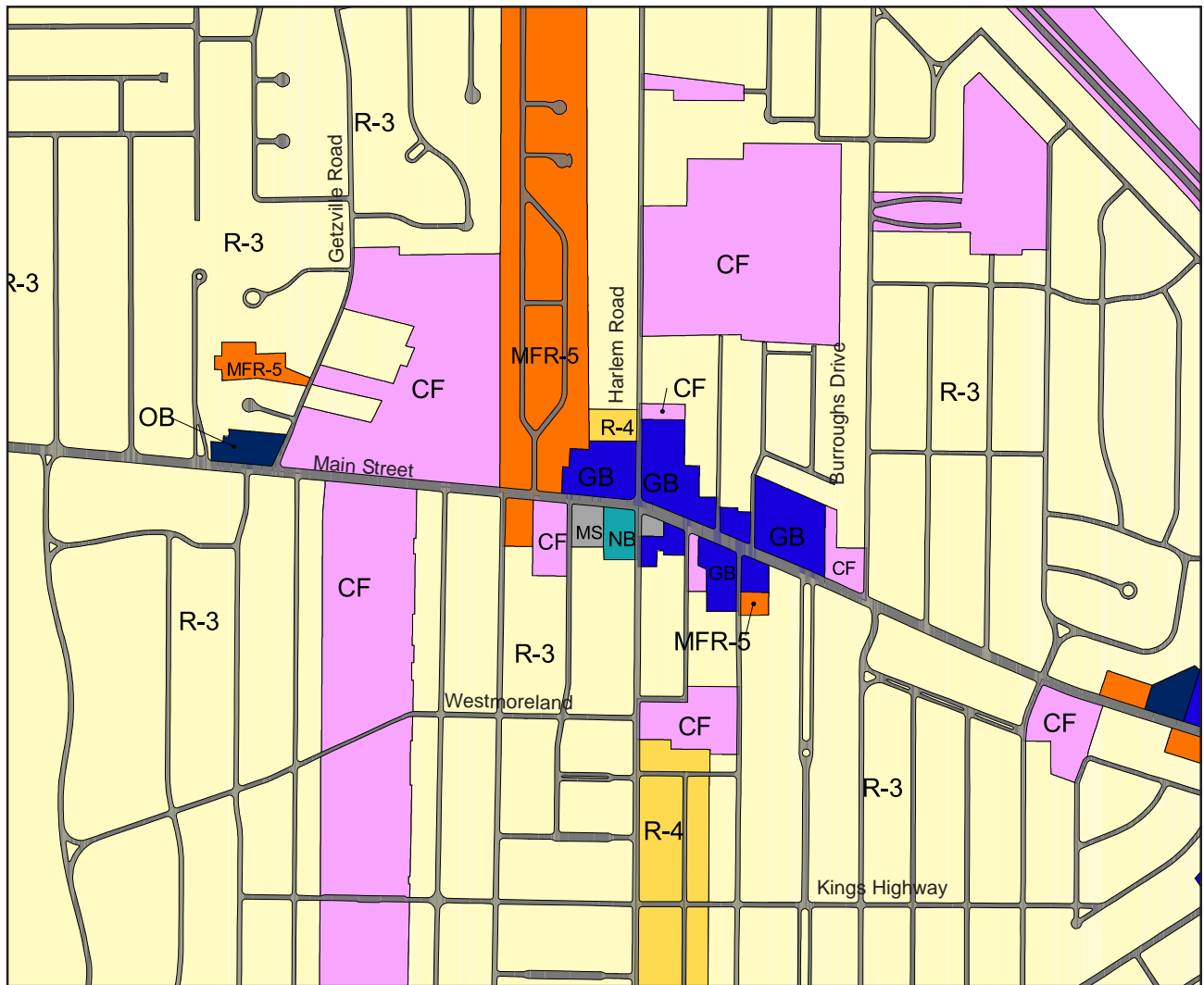
Snyder's current zoning

Zoning Legend

NB - Neighborhood Business (local shopping needs)
GB - General Business (community wide shopping needs)
OB - Office Building
MS - Motor Service (gas stations, auto repair, motels, restaurants)
R-3 - Single family residential, 3.5 units/acre
R-4 - Attached or detached residential, 6 units/acre
MFR 4A - Multi-family residential, 8 units/acre
MFR 5 - Multi-family residential, 8-12 units/acre
CF - Community Facilities (schools, churches, libraries etc.)

3.9 Current Development Incentives

Speaking to numerous business and property owners in Snyder, many feel that there are no current economic incentives to encourage them to stay put in this business district or any in the older parts of town. Although most love the Snyder area and Business District, they all tend to say that the Town Government doesn't do enough to help them - - this appears to be the same for the Eggertsville and Harlem/Kensington businesses as well.

Due to the demands, size and scale of many typical newer "suburban" retail developments, developers tend to "shy away" from established neighborhoods due to potential opposition from surrounding residents. Development creativity for mixed-use, traditional, smaller-scale infill projects, or the rehab of older neighborhood structures, is not typically given much economic incentive within the town, thus proliferating the "sprawl" to the greener parts of town. Therefore it is much easier, and often cheaper, for a developer to build on a vacant site in eastern or northern Amherst, or even move out to Clarence, Pendleton or Lancaster.

Current incentives through the Amherst Industrial Development Agency (AIDA) are geared toward the property owners and do little to assist small businesses. In an effort to attract new investment to Snyder's Business District, the Town has targeted this community for inclusion within the 485-B program. This is an incentive program set up to encourage commercial investment through a graduated tax-abatement system. While the concept behind the 485-B program is appropriate to encourage investment in Snyder, its incentives are more significant for "big-box" developments or new construction projects. The experienced, larger developer knows and uses the program to his or her benefit, but generally on larger office park projects. In contrast, discussions with local economic development officials indicate that the minimum investment required to even qualify for the 485-B program is often greater than the average small business enterprise can afford under most developments or it is difficult to raise the assessed value of existing properties by more than $10,000, the minimum amount required to qualify for the program.

Fortunately, much attention is now being placed on revitalization and redevelopment of the older parts of the Town by the Superviser and Town Board members. The Amherst Town Board has recently authorized the Amherst I.D.A. to offer other incentives to smaller businesses in designated areas. These include "jumbo" bonds, where several small projects grouped together can enjoy the same benefits as larger projects, as well as the savings on sales tax on smaller projects.