

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In August, 2007 faculty of the Department of Geography at Binghamton University were approached by the City of Binghamton's Planning Department to provide consulting services for an East Side Revitalization Strategy. The consultants were to develop a revitalization strategy that included the following elements:

- Creation and inventory of existing conditions within and/or affecting the East Side, as well as an analysis of opportunities and constraints to revitalization.
- Establishment of a vision statement, goals and objectives for revitalization of the neighborhood.
- Develop recommendations for implementation of goals and objectives.

The consulting team employed a variety of methods, including meetings with the East Side Neighborhood Assembly, surveys of other residents and business owners, demographic analyses, a land use analysis, a zoning analysis, and a housing quality survey to complete the project. From the analysis of the data collected, the consulting team created a series of maps in GIS to illustrate the changing demographic conditions on the East Side. A second series of maps illustrates the current housing quality conditions of the neighborhood.

Between 1990 and 2000 the total population of the East Side decreased by approximately 850 people. The decline in population was spread across all age groups. Levels of educational attainment remained stable between the two Census years. There was a substantial decrease in buying power on the East Side as the median household income failed to keep up with inflation between 1990 and 2000. Significantly, there was a large increase in the population living below the poverty level. The number of housing units decreased on the East Side and the percent of owner occupied housing declined slightly and renter occupied housing units increased slightly. The number of vacant housing units also increased. The East Side neighborhood experienced a decrease in families residing there, however, single parent families increased substantially.

The primary land uses in the East Side are community services and residential. Forty-four percent of all land area in the East Side study area is used for community services. The Hospital Hill area, location of the former Binghamton Psychiatric Center, accounts for 90 percent of the land uses for community services. Single-family homes make up 75 percent of residential uses. Commercial land uses comprise only 10 percent of land area. Most commercial uses are located along the Robinson Street and upper Court Street corridors. Six percent of land area within the East Side is vacant land.

Results from the housing quality survey indicate that housing conditions on the East Side remain good and have not deteriorated significantly from an earlier 2000 housing quality study. Painting and minor siding repairs are the main issues facing many property owners on the East Side. Properties requiring major repairs are clustered in certain locations throughout the East Side. These properties are illustrated in the document that follows. Finally, there are seventeen properties that have deteriorated to the point where they should be demolished. Eight of these properties are along the Robinson Street corridor and four are within the immediate vicinity of the Cameo Theater, which is recommended as the main focus area for initial implementation of improvements.

Residential surveys and discussions with the East Side Neighborhood Assembly indicated that the residents find many things to like about their neighborhood such as, quietness, neighborliness/friendliness, and safety. The East Side residents also indicated that there is a strong sense of neighborhood that exists. The condition of roads/highways and sidewalks was the top concern of the residents. In addition, several members of the East Side Neighborhood Assembly pointed to the speed of traffic on Robinson Street and the amount of truck traffic as serious concerns. Almost 100 percent of the East Side residents shop within the neighborhood, but many expressed a desire to see more, and a greater variety of stores.

The survey administered to business owners indicate that a majority of businesses believe the volume of traffic on Robinson Street is important. However, some believe it is too fast. Each proprietor was asked what they would like to see in the future, focusing on preferred other businesses, desired changes on Robinson Street, and actions the City of Binghamton can or should take to foster the commercial sector in this neighborhood. The range of preferred other businesses is wide, from “something” to “a variety.” Retail, restaurants and coffee shops, and manufacturing/industries were all mentioned. These results suggest that the prevailing attitude is that more businesses are better. This is in concert with the residents’ responses, in which “more stores/variety” and “more businesses” were among the most frequently mentioned. The results of both sets of surveys suggest that the East Side is valued highly by those who live and work there. There is agreement that changes are needed relating to the condition of the infrastructure, aesthetics, and the need for additional businesses.

Our goal in creating a revitalization plan is to build on and improve the strong and cogent sense of place and community that will attract new residents to the area and make existing residents proud to live here. In conjunction with the East Side Neighborhood Assembly, the following vision statement was developed, which guided our work.

The East Side of Binghamton is a safe, vital and attractive community that draws upon the history and diversity of its inhabitants to provide residents with access to a full range of goods and services.

The vision statement was used to develop objectives and goals aimed at achieving the vision. The priority goals associated with revitalizing and transforming the East Side are:

- **Quality of Life:** Retaining the unique assets and character-defining feature of the East Side neighborhood is critical to enhancing and improving the quality of life for East Side residents.
- **Public Safety:** Providing a sense of safety and security to all community members is necessary to encourage investment in the East Side and promote a good quality of life.
- **Economic Revitalization:** A strong economic presence that provides jobs and opportunities to surrounding neighborhoods is critical to the long-term success of the East Side neighborhood. Improving the aesthetic character of key business areas such as Robinson Street will make it a more inviting destination for neighborhood residents and other community members.
- **Smart Growth and Sustainability:** Smart growth and sustainable development principles ensure a community is capitalizing on its existing resources and assets while promoting a healthy and active environment for residents and workers.
- **Community Participation:** Communities with high levels of citizen participation are more successful at bringing about positive change.

The Robinson Street district was selected by the consultants for an in-depth analysis. The Robinson Street District is generally located along the Robinson Street corridor between the railroad bridges west of Alice Street to the State Hospital, including the adjoining neighborhoods and portions of Court Street. The district represents an opportunity to enhance the role of the Robinson Street corridor as a meaningful neighborhood focal point. By defining the commercial district with improved landscaping and pedestrian amenities, this district will help to stabilize adjoining neighborhoods. The specific goals associated with this corridor are:

- Walkable Community
- Economic Revitalization
- Parks and Recreation

Section 11.0, Implementation, contains recommendations and an Implementation Matrix (Figure 11.2) to help achieve the goals and vision for the East Side. Improvements in transportation infrastructure and traffic considerations are a major component of the revitalization plan for the East Side of the City of Binghamton, especially along the Robinson Street corridor which serves the East Side as a small commercial strip located within a largely residential community. The improvements in transportation infrastructure and traffic flow efficiency along the Robinson Street corridor were developed with consideration given to the concerns raised by East Side residents attending neighborhood assembly meetings, by resident responses to surveys, and by Robinson Street business proprietors. The decreased speed at which traffic will be able to move through the corridor will help the businesses located along the corridor become more visible to drivers and more accessible to pedestrians. Creating a pedestrian-friendly community contributes to the development of walkable communities.

Additionally, it was determined that the area's aesthetic appeal is also in need of improvement. Several recommendations are included in this report such as landscaping, improved 'curb appeal' of housing units and walking spaces, more benches and park spaces to encourage outdoor pursuits, increased appreciation for the creek bordering Calvin Coolidge Elementary School, the incorporation of murals and other art projects into the community, renovation of the Cameo Theater's exterior, storefront renewal and beautification, litter-curbing efforts, improved and widened sidewalks, and buried electric and telephone wires.

The Cameo Theater District should be the focus of, and the starting point for East Side revitalization efforts. The Cameo Theater should be rehabilitated to become the focal point of the East Side neighborhood. There are several potential uses for the theater. First, it could serve as a multipurpose community center. It could maintain its theatrical function as a community theater. The Endicott Performing Arts Center (EPAC) was designed with just this in mind. Other ideas for the Cameo include: a community center for neighborhood assembly meetings and neighborhood exhibits such as children's art shows; and a neighborhood youth center offering game rooms, a children's library, and space for after-school activities.

This document provides additional recommendations for the Cameo Theater District. The recommendations are divided into three categories: improving the streetscape, incorporating landscaping, and managing other aesthetics. They are not mutually exclusive, but rather provide a convenient way to organize the recommendations. Our recommendations include: a community gateway at both ends of Robinson Street, replacement of sidewalks, improvement of lighting, increased bicycle friendliness, improvement in outdoor spaces, covered bus stops, an increase in the number of public benches and tables, landscaping and aesthetics incorporated into the streetscape, and improvement of building facades. Several conceptual sketches are provided to help the reader visualize these improvements.

The East Side of Binghamton has experienced economic, demographic, and aesthetic decline in recent years. The good news is that the area really is in very good condition when compared to many other parts of the City. For the most part, it is a wonderful residential area that offers affordable housing. Residents feel that efforts at revitalization of the East Side should focus on the Robinson Street corridor, especially the area immediately adjacent to the Cameo Theater. The Robinson Street Corridor can become a flourishing commercial area, but the transformation will not be easy. The recommendations presented in this document are directed toward that revitalization.. It is hoped that all will recognize that the recommendations are not a list from which to pick and choose, but rather a comprehensive approach that, cumulatively, will lead to the changes sought. Even with these recommendations, other actions are required. In order to revitalize this area, the City must work with property owners to prevent additional deterioration and provide incentives to improve the appearance of their properties. The City, County, and State also need to provide incentives to attract additional businesses to the Robinson Street corridor. However, how these initiatives are to be funded is a daunting question. The City must take advantage of all possible grant opportunities and encourage public/private partnerships to fund the revitalization efforts.