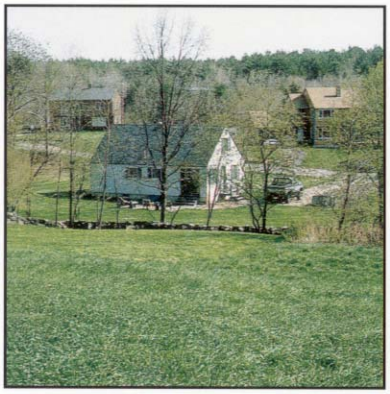
Smart Development for Quality Communities

Volume 2

A Design Guidebook for Towns and Villages in Cattaraugus County, New York



Prepared for Cattaraugus County by

Randall Arendt

Senior Conservation Advisor

NATURAL LANDS TRUST

April 2001

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CATTARAUGUS COUNTY

COUNTY LEGISLATURE

GERARD J. FITZPATRICK
Chairman

303 Court Street
Little Valley, New York 14755

April 30, 2001

Community Leaders and Citizens
47 Municipalities in Cattaraugus County, New York

Dear Colleagues:

This Guidebook, Smart Development for Quality Communities: A Guidebook for Towns and Villages in Cattaraugus County, New York (2001), was prepared by conservation experts Randall Arendt of Rhode Island (www.greenerprospects.com), and the Natural Lands Trust of Pennsylvania (www.natlands.org). It presents advanced concepts and guidelines for both promoting rural growth, and at the same time, protecting our natural and man-made environments.

Cattaraugus County is a beautiful community with 85,000 people in 32 towns, 13 villages and two cities. These communities lie between Buffalo, New York and Bradford, Pennsylvania offering a diversity of rural and urban settings and lifestyles. This Guidebook is one of many necessary approaches, and it will benefit everyone by showing stakeholders how to develop and prosper without damaging community character or rural ambiance. Every effort has been made to promote this new tool to assist you in your work.

This Guidebook was prepared for Cattaraugus County and its municipalities and citizens, under the supervision of the Cattaraugus County Department of Economic Development, Planning and Tourism. For more information, please call 716-938-9111 x2307, or write to 303 Court Street, Little Valley, New York 14755 or visit our County's Internet Web Site at www.co.cattaraugus.ny.us. The next step is up to you.

Sincerely,

Gerard J. Fitzpatrick
Chairman

GJF:mep

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and Our Future

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This document was prepared by:

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Note: Photographs used in this publication are not from Cattaraugus County

From Visioning to Design

Generally speaking, local residents and officials must be able *to picture the results* of different development approaches — including the one their town or village is currently following (either consciously or unconsciously) — before their community can be motivated to take a positive role in shaping its future land-use patterns and its overall appearance.

The first step in this direction in Cattaraugus County was taken during the autumn of 1999, when more than 60 residents and officials from 47 different municipalities participated in an *Image Preference Survey*. Each of more than 100 visual images, projected onto a large screen from color slide transparencies, illustrated various examples of residential and commercial development, including what one participant called "the good, the bad, and the ugly." Everyone rated his or her first impressions of each of the images (which appeared on the screen for just six seconds) on a scale ranging from –10 to +10. All of the scores for each image were averaged to produce a "mean value" reflecting the consensus of the whole group for each individual photo. The images were then sorted according to their scores and were arranged in ascending order with the least-favored images appearing first and the most-favored ones appearing last. These results were shown several weeks later to the same group of county residents, who were curious to see how the exercise came out.

A permanent record of the results of that *Image Preference Survey* was made, containing page-sized color prints of each image, each print labelled with its average score. Inserted into protective plastic sheets, these prints were then collected together into a three-ring binder and presented to the County Department of Economic Development, Planning, and Tourism. The principal findings that emerged from this survey have been summarized in Appendix Three of this report, to which interested readers are referred.

This exercise helped prepare the way for later phases of the *Visioning and Leadership Training Project*. Among the goals of this preparatory exercise were the following purposes:

- to help residents understand the basis of "community form," including those elements that cause the town or village to look the way it does, and those elements which make it most memorable (in both the positive and negative senses)
- to help determine local values in perceiving and ranking the various visual characteristics that combine in people's minds as they form their impressions of a particular place — in other words, which scenes were found to be most pleasing, most displeasing, and why?
- to help evaluate and interpret alternative development types as they would affect the appearance of one's community, for better or worse.

Visual images provided the principal means of teaching and communication throughout the multiple workshops conducted as part of this project. Information was presented through the medium of color slides to make the planning and design concepts more easily understood by project participants, most of whom were members of municipal boards and commissions without formal training or professional backgrounds in the fields of town planning and community development.

Making Community Form Understandable

Without special training such as provided in this project, most residents and officials, in any part of the country, have considerable difficulty understanding the relationship between the verbiage contained in their various land-use codes and the physical appearance of new development that ultimately occurs on the ground. Communities painstakingly prepare Comprehensive Plans fairly accurately reflecting the hopes and dreams of their residents, and are then surprised and bewildered by the disappointing forms taken by new businesses and subdivisions which seem to have been air-lifted from Long Island (or Buffalo or Erie), bearing apparently no relation to the community's expressed desires as articulated in its Comprehensive Plan.

In towns and villages with zoning and subdivision ordinances, these results are usually due to the fact that a substantial disconnect exists between the adopted plans and the codes. Sometimes it is as if the various documents had been written on different planets, the discrepancies are so great and profound. No community includes among its Comprehensive Plan "purposes" the goal of converting every acre of farmland or woodland into cookie-cutter subdivisions consisting of nothing more than lawns and cul-de-sacs. Yet this is precisely what occurs, over long periods of time, when conventional ordinances are applied to development proposals in a community. All one need do is look to other areas which have experienced many decades of typical suburban growth. Nor do these plans ever state the policy that arterial highways are to be steadily degraded into congested shopping strips with garish signs, extensive asphalt paving, and minimal or no landscaping, simultaneously sapping the economic energy from their historic commercial centers into which generations have invested countless dollars over the last century or so.

In communities with little or no regulations pertaining to zoning or subdivision development, there is less surprise because this situation typically indicates that the town or village has not yet generated sufficient local political support to establish even minimal community standards governing the location, intensity, and appearance of new development. In these "ungoverned" communities the unofficial policy is "do as you please, anything goes, it is all the same to us." If signs publicly proclaiming this unwritten policy were erected at various points in the community, it might help elevate awareness among residents that the values of their property are essentially unprotected, and that anyone is able to come into their neighborhood and do whatever they wish, regardless of impacts upon their neighbors and the value of their largest personal investments: their homes.

One purpose of this project is to promote the ability to imagine one's community ten or twenty years from now, and to prevent new development that is inconsistent with the vision of its residents, as expressed in their Comprehensive Plan. Sometimes that new development follows local ordinances which are themselves inconsistent with the larger community vision. (In those cases the solution is to bring the old codes into line with the Plan.) And sometimes that new and inconsistent development was never required to follow any local ordinance or regulation, in communities where no standards yet exist to govern such things.

In Honeyoye Falls, a village south of Rochester, residents were perplexed at the enormous differences between older established neighborhoods in their community, which are desirable, and new subdivisions built there in more recent years. The differences in character and appearance were largely due, it was discovered, to the "hidden determinants" of their future growth and development — their "community DNA" if you will — as contained in the dimensional standards in their zoning ordinance, which essentially dictated that new development should look more like a Long Island suburb than a quaint 19th century village in western New York. Unlike human DNA, however, these "community genes" can be fairly easily revised to more closely reflect resi-

dents' stated desires and preferences regarding the location, appearance, and functional characteristics of new homes and businesses. Meetings with other residents and village officials resulted in a consensus that the zoning should be changed to match the village's traditional character, before that same zoning changed the Village to transform it into something resembling an anonymous bedroom community of Manhattan, Albany, or Syracuse. The principal tool they employed to discover the appropriate dimensions for their updated code was a tape measure, which they used to document lot widths, the average distance between front porches and sidewalks, street pavement widths, and the distance between opposing housefronts across the street from each other.

Although the participants in Cattaraugus County did not become design experts as the result of their participation in this project, they did begin to become familiar with three fundamental concepts: Landscape Structure, the Built Environment, and Community Form.

Landscape Structure refers to the framework or organization of the various underlying natural elements in a town or village. Landscape structure often evolves from the natural systems running through the community, from topography, watersheds, drainage patterns, rivers and streams, lakes and ponds, wetlands, soils, and geology. Vegetation patterns — such as the patchwork of open fields and pastures among wooded hills and plateaus — often reflect the natural elements listed here, as well as climatic forces. These elements are sometimes

referred to as the "green infrastructure," around which trainees learned to design new development in a simple creative approach to laying out subdivisions around the central organizing principle of open space protection.

The Built Environment is the man-made pattern of buildings, streets, sidewalks, bridges, wires, pipes, and drains that facilitate human habitation and commerce. These elements are sometimes referred to as the "grey infrastructure."

Community Form relates to the "third dimension" of the landscape or townscape, typically expressed through vertical elements such as buildings, trees, signs, and utility poles. Community Form is the composite picture of many different natural and man-made elements, including landforms, vegetation, open spaces, and the built environment. In other words, Community Form refers to the resulting configuration created by the relationship between **landscape structure** and the **built environment**. It is influenced by the natural systems, by land use, and by land division practices.

Community-Based Design Standards

Cumulative Impacts of Many Small Decisions

Design decisions having an impact on community appearance and functioning are made almost every day in different towns and villages across Cattaraugus County. Those decisions are taken by individual landowners, businessmen, and developers with respect to long-term investments they are making in their properties. Such investments might be minor (a new sign, a set of replacement windows, or exterior siding for an existing establishment, for example), or fairly major (such as a new shop or a row of houselots). Whatever their size or scale, their impact upon a community grows every year in a cumulative way. In other words, these seemingly minor changes add up, over time, to alter the face of the community in ways that either improve or detract from its overall appearance.

Although many of these changes happen without registering much of an impact at the moment of their occurrence, their significance becomes more evident when one has an opportunity to compare photographs of the same street taken several decades apart. Particularly striking in downtown areas, for example, is the replacement of tall canopy shade trees with small flowering ornamental trees out of scale with the surrounding streetscape, or — much less happily — tall pole-mounted signs and extensive areas of asphalt. On a subtler scale, another change that is perhaps less evident to most people is the gradual shrinkage of the traditionally large

and vertically-oriented plate glass windows in village shops, whose storefronts are now frequently partially covered with plywood or brick infilling punctuated by short windows less than half their original size, and often installed so they are wider than they are tall.

In addition to the above modifications, the changeover from wood and metal to plastic and neon in business signage has profoundly altered the atmosphere of many communities across the county during the last 40 or 50 years, causing them to more closely resemble strip malls around Buffalo, Erie, or Cleveland rather than looking like they "belonged" in Cattaraugus County where they actually are — in one of the state's most beautiful counties with a rich historical tradition of distinctive small towns and village centers.

Hidden Design Standards

Sometimes those decisions are driven by local land-use documents, whose "design standards" are typically far from obvious and usually never labelled as such. But design standards they are, to be sure, for they clearly determine much of the ultimate appearance of any development which is designed to comply with those seemingly innocuous requirements.

Examples of the "hidden" design implications of many typical ordinances include specifying minimum dimensions for lot sizes, street frontages, or building setbacks; limits on building height, sign area or height; and parking requirements, including the presence (or absence) of standards for shade-tree planting and other basic landscaping features.

In a curious but very real way, failing to require shade trees and other landscaping in new parking lots effectively establishes a hidden design standard that essentially grants official approval to proposals to bulldoze an area and cover it with asphalt. Sanctioning such changes through "pavement-based" regulations for parking lots constitutes every bit as much of a "design standard" as guiding such development efforts through "landscape-based" requirements for the same kind of facility.

A similar observation could be made with regard to suburban-based development standards permitting or encouraging new shops to be set back far from the street with large front-yard parking spaces dominating their visual appearance. Such standards produce much different results than do other village-based approaches which replace conventional "*minimum* front setbacks" with more creative "*maximum* front setbacks" (accompanied by requirements for rear parking provision).

However, in towns or villages without even basic zoning or subdivision standards, decisions to make changes in one's property are essentially a "hit-or-miss" process, typically based upon nothing more than whatever the landowner or developer may have seen down the road in the next municipality, or in a neighboring county. In those cases, the "design standards" are concealed to an even greater extent, because they are not implied in any official document prepared by the community in question. They are, instead, implied in the regulations adopted by another town or village from which the landowner or developer picked up his design ideas — whether those ideas are based on suburban models rich in asphalt and plastic, or on other kinds of models placing greater emphasis on traditional streetscapes lined with canopy trees and faced with buildings (either shops or homes) having modest front setbacks.

Getting Back on Track

Communities that successfully attract retail trade from tourists and other new customers have done so, in many cases, by taking stock of the appearance of their downtown districts and then taking steps to build support among merchants and landlords to gradually re-create the community's once-distinctive storefronts and tree-lined streetscapes. This is often a long and steady process, where improvements occur one sign at a time, one storefront at a time, one tree at a time, as evidenced by the slow but steady progress in this direction by Ellicottville. However, if there is an overall vision of what the community wants itself to look like in, say, five or ten years, and if normal investment decisions to periodically renew the building fabric are channeled in a direction informed by the town or village's long-term vision plan, the community can remake itself according to a mold of its own choosing, rather than continuing to drift in the unguided current of haphazard changes which create only a hodge-podge. Within the County, Franklinville stands out as another example of a community that has taken very positive steps toward reclaiming its central area, and in Little Valley a similar awareness among officials has been increasing in recent years.

Consciously-chosen Design Standards

As we have learned above, the issue is not whether to adopt design standards (for they exist in even the simplest codes), but instead which standards to incorporate into updated land-use documents. That choice can be a relatively easy one in cases where an overall agreement exists among town and village residents about what kinds of development are more desirable and what kinds are less desirable. The results of the County's *Image Preference Survey*, reflecting the scores given to each of more than 100 photographs of different kinds of development by a cross-section of county residents a year ago, provide a logical and excellent starting point for local discussions aimed at creating a local consensus about what is "good, bad, or ugly."

Design standards fall into two broad categories: ones prescribing certain actions or end-results quite closely through detailed requirements, and ones offering more latitude or lee-way as to the specific approach taken, so long as the final product conforms with the community's ultimate goal or vision of what it wants to become. The latter are sometimes known as "performance-based" standards, and they can be fruitfully combined with the more direct and prescriptive approach of specifying particular dimensions or requirements (because this is not an "either/or" situation).

For example, in situations involving certain unique uses that almost necessarily require extensive areas of front paving (such as gasoline filling stations), it would be impracticable to specify a modest *maximum* front setback for structures (such as buildings or pump islands) — as one might normally specify for most other kinds of commercial uses in areas where the community wishes to foster a more traditional townscape appearance. However, in such situations the alternative performance-based standards would be far more appropriate, and could be easily met with something as simple as a line of shade trees planted together closely along the sidewalk (see Figure VC.4).

The prescriptive approach could also allow for minor and occasional variations to the established rule, provided that those variations truly support and further the overall purposes which the standards are intended to serve. By way of another example, in a downtown business district — where there might be a very strong presumption that all front facades shall be positioned within a fairly limited range of street setbacks — commercial buildings could be permitted to be located farther from the front lot line than normal if the intention is to create a small "outdoor room" consisting of a landscaped alcove or courtyard. As illustrated in house is FigureVC.9, the deeper setback area not only provides a

welcome and inviting place for shoppers to pause and rest themselves on benches shaded by additional trees, it also doubles the display window area creating a favorable economic advantage for those downtown building owners and merchants associated with those premises.

A balance can often be struck between the prescriptive approach and its performance-based counterpart by employing the useful phrase "shall generally." In practice, this device could take the form of an ordinance provision such as "signs with moveable lettering shall generally be prohibited," the purpose of which is to halt proliferation of the kind of mobile sign illustrated on the left in Figure HC.14 (which obtained the lowest score of any sign rated in the *Image Preference Survey*). However, to inform readers more fully about the possible alternatives that would be permitted, this "shall generally" wording should be followed with a proviso describing the exceptions to the general rule. In the above example, such exceptions might include "signs which are stationary, fashioned of wood, and illuminated by exterior lighting only." The sign pictured on the right in Figure HC.14 meets those criteria. More importantly for local signage firms and for merchants, the favored, alternative sign provides more employment for local carpenters, more trade for local building supply stores, and allows merchants to vary and update their messages every week, every day, even every hour, compared with the less attractive, mass-produced metal flashing signs on wheels illustrated above, most of which are manufactured in the Midwest. By contrast, the preferred alternative is built with locally-available elements including 6″ x 6″ pressure-treated timbers and an exterior grade plywood panel covered with indoor/outdoor carpet, onto which plastic letters are affixed with Velcro tabs the size of postage stamps.

With respect to landscape materials, a prescriptive ordinance would specify certain species of trees, shrubs and wildflowers. Such lists are often extremely helpful to applicants, many of whom might not otherwise have a clue as to what the community really would like to see if it relied solely upon a performance-based approach utilizing terms such as "hardy, drought-resistent, low-maintenance, dense screening, or seasonal color." A better approach would be to combine the helpfulness of the list (which assists the novice and which should normally be couched by the "such as" phrase), with the flexibility of some performance wording (which would be welcomed by the experienced landscaper). Following that approach, the provision might begin by specifying a preference for native specie trees, shrubs, and plants (*such as* oak, red maple, green ash, viburnum, red-twig dogwood, daylilies, coneflowers, daisies, and Queen Anne's lace), but also allowing for non-native species meeting the performance characteristics of low maintenance, hardiness, seasonal color, etc. It is also helpful to proscribe (prohibit) certain species known to arborists as inherently problematic. An example would be the Bradford Callery Pear which, in colder climates susceptible to snow and ice storms, are prone to massive splitting. The resulting disfigurement is so pronounced that the tree is typically felled at that point.

Building Local Character into Local Developments

If new development is to reflect and reinforce the essential character of a particular region or community, local land-use regulations should include design standards (with both prescriptive and performance-based language) requiring applicants to pay close attention to those aspects of their property — and to the special qualities of their neighborhood — that give it its unique form and feeling. In other words, new development should be shaped and sited to strengthen rather than dilute the positive recurring patterns found in rural landscapes or in village townscapes, and the particular characteristics which make each place special should be amplified and not weakened by new buildings, signs, and other physical changes.

The positive recurring patterns noted above typically involve lines of canopy shade trees along country roads and village streets, hedgerows separating open fields and pastures, front porches and shopfronts with tall windows and modest setbacks from local streets, and natural areas alongside stream valleys, wetlands, and creeks. When these elements are removed or seriously altered, residents' sense of place is palpably diminished, even though perhaps most of those elements might actually be little-noticed by most people in the community as they go about their daily business. However, when the Victorian house is pulled down and is replaced by the squat brick laundromat, or when a large maple is replaced with a tall pole-mounted plastic sign, residents quickly become aware of the small things in their community that they really value and would miss if someday those things disappeared.

It has been the purpose of the Visioning and Leadership Training Project to provide residents and officials with the understanding and tools needed for them to effect positive change in their communities, as they grow and change over time.

The following pages contain a wealth of good ideas and techniques that can be applied to situations in Cattaraugus County in the coming decades.