

CHAPTER 1: OVERVIEW

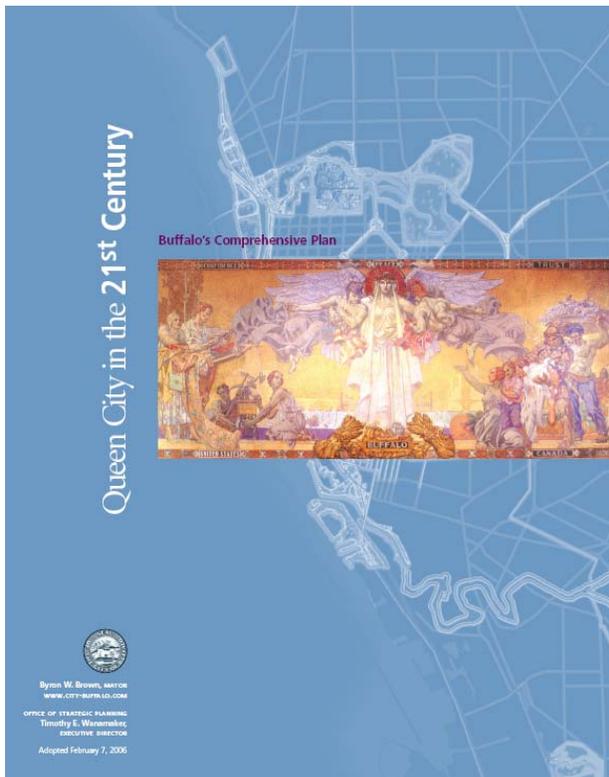


Figure 1: Cover page for *Queen City in the 21st Century: Buffalo's Comprehensive Plan*.

Introduction

In 2000, the Mayor of Buffalo created a neighborhood planning process utilizing participatory neighborhood planning practices called the Good Neighbors Planning Alliance, as part of the initiative to create and implement the Buffalo Comprehensive Plan. As a result, the Black Rock-Riverside Good Neighbors Planning Alliance (Black Rock-Riverside GNPA) was created, as one of 10 planning alliance areas in the City of Buffalo.

With strong Council Member support, in 2007 the Black Rock-Riverside GNPA began a process of creating neighborhood plans in partnership with local block groups, leading to the current document, *Historic Black Rock: War of 1812 Bicentennial Community Plan*. This plan is guided by the following community vision for Historic Black Rock, arrived at by the Dearborn Street Community Association, a prominent block club in the area:

Vision for Historic Black Rock

Enjoy a safe, clean, diverse, and walkable neighborhood with a sense of community that is widely admired. Vibrant churches, stable home

values, a prosperous nearby Niagara Street business district and easy access to waterfront parks and the Riverwalk provide amenities and real history unique to their community. Active citizen participation in neighborhood life sustains the community's harmonious quality of life.

This vision is adapted from the document, "Draft Shared Vision for Historical Black Rock's Dearborn Street Community Association", created with the block club in Summer, 2008, with assistance from Phil Haberstro, director of the Buffalo Wellness Institute.

Planning Context

In February, 2006, the City of Buffalo adopted the *Queen City in the 21st Century: Buffalo's Comprehensive Plan*, which set forth the planning principles and guidance for future prosperity and development in the City of Buffalo. (See Figure 1.)

One of the key principles in the plan is to "Plan with Neighborhoods: The Comprehensive Plan provides a broad framework for neighborhood redevelopment



Figure 2: Aerial view of Historic Black Rock created during construction of Squaw Island Park.

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Figure 3: The Black Rock-Riverside Good Neighbors Planning Alliance is in northwest Buffalo

ment across the city, but depends on neighborhood residents themselves to create and help implement more detailed local plans. In this way, residents can work with City staff to tailor overall policies to local needs, values and visions. Participatory neighborhood planning can also take advantage of local knowledge in applying city-wide policies and help mobilize local resources for implementation.”

ning Alliance (GNPA) to support this process of neighborhood planning. Residents have been invited to participate in planning for eleven Planning Communities or districts around the city. Staff from the Office of Strategic Planning (OSP) provides guidance and technical assistance to create usable plans consistent with city-wide policies. All neighborhood plans produced through the GNPA will be submitted to the Planning Board for review and then forwarded to Common Council for adoption.” (*Queen City in the 21st Century: Buffalo’s Comprehensive Plan*, page 86.)

The Black Rock-Riverside GNPA recognized the need to plan locally, first by drafting a broader, GNPA-wide draft plan in January, 2007, and then deciding to augment that effort with more localized “mini-plans” that could address the special circumstances present at a more localized level in five areas that comprise the BRR GNPA (See Figure 4):

- Black Rock/Niagara St. Commercial
- Grant-Amherst

“The City has created the Good Neighbors Plan-

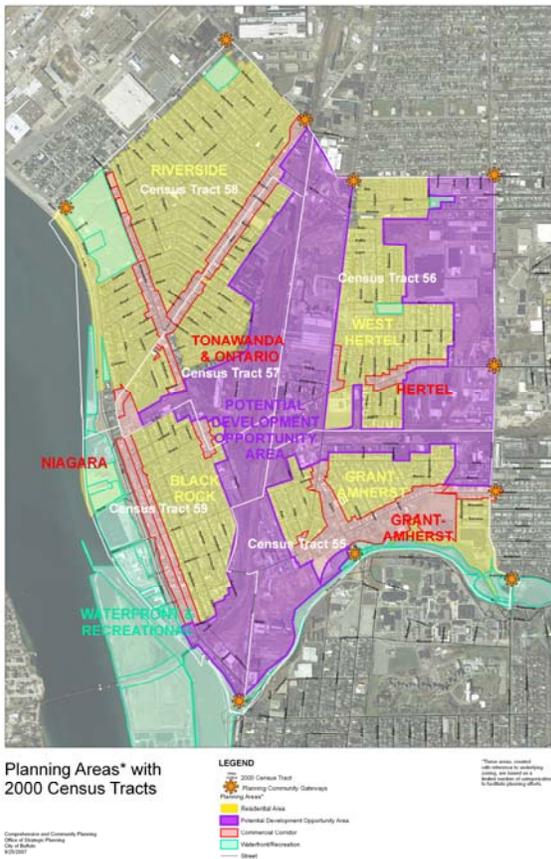


Figure 4: Black Rock-Riverside GNPA Planning Areas with 2000 Census Tracts.

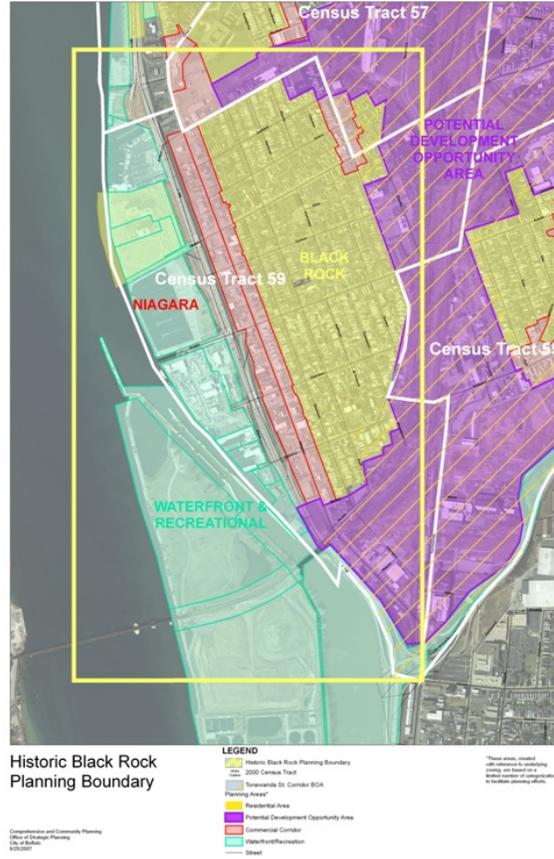


Figure 5: Historic Black Rock’s planning boundary (yellow box) is comprised of Census Tract 59 and the Niagara St. commercial corridor.

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- Riverside/Tonawanda-Ontario Commercial
- West Hertel/Hertel Commercial
- Tonawanda-Chandler Rail Corridor and North Elmwood Avenue/Potential Development Opportunity Area

During this time, Black Rock-Riverside GNPA planners developed a growing appreciation for the irreplaceable historic and architectural legacy of Historic Black Rock. In addition, Black Rock-Riverside GNPA facilitated or otherwise became aware of several initiatives recently launched in the area; for example, the Black Rock-Riverside Neighborhood Housing Services (NHS) Targeted Streets initiative, where Dearborn and East were targeted for home rehabilitation funding in a process that included a community meeting in support of that designation. Additional reasons led to Historic Black Rock being chosen as the focus of the first mini-plan:

1. Historic Black Rock was built out first of all the parts of Black Rock-Riverside, in mid-1800s, and other areas relied on the prosperity of Historic Black Rock to get their start,
2. Historic Black Rock continues to have the most historic, prominent buildings in Black Rock-Riverside and offers many significant regional assets along the waterfront,
3. Historic Black Rock has been recently challenged. The area was the subject of several major developments that highlighted the growing fragility of this historic community, including the 2004 Ambassador Bridge proposal, the 2007 proposal for sex offender housing at 31 Tonawanda Street (a property now slated for student housing), and the 2007 closure of St. Francis Xavier Roman Catholic Church (later to become the Buffalo Religious Arts Center in 2008). In addition, rising numbers in certain types of crime, vacant properties, vacant lots, and other issues affecting quality of life demand a community-wide response now, before the problems become intractable and change the character of the community.
4. Historic Black Rock is surrounded by major geographic features on three sides, including rail, creek, and river/highway, and in light of these features, it is of great strategic importance from a geographic perspective: Strengthening Historic Black Rock can form the basis of strengthening in neighboring communities to the north and east, while weakening in Historic Black Rock would make it hard to maintain progress made in other

areas. Simply put, Historic Black Rock represents both the past and the future of Black Rock-Riverside.

5. Historic Black Rock has an active block club, the Dearborn Street Community Association, and this block club recognizes the value of neighborhood planning and as a result it has partnered effectively with the Black Rock-Riverside GNPA. This was essential in bringing successful neighborhood planning to fruition, as represented by this, the *War of 1812 Bicentennial Community Plan for Historic Black Rock*.

6. Historic Black Rock is on the move! Many key initiatives are presently underway in the community, making it a place where existing work can be leveraged and turned into momentum for a brighter future. Several of these initiatives are highlighted in Chapter 2, titled "Why Black Rock Now?"

Geographic Area

Historic Black Rock is comprised of census tract 59 in the City of Buffalo, NY, plus the Niagara Street commercial/industrial area from Niagara-Tonawanda to Niagara-Ontario as defined by local zoning. It had 3,784 residents in 2000, down from 4,195 in 1990. (See Appendices 4, 5, and 6 for Land Use and Zoning maps and selected demographics.)

The Public Vision

The strength of this plan is its connection to the people who live and work in Historic Black Rock. Throughout the planning process, the reality that residents and businesses in Historic Black Rock



Figure 6: *Queen City in the 21st Century: Buffalo's Comprehensive Plan* sets forth a series of guiding planning principles that integrate the Community, Economy and Environment to form a cohesive blueprint for Buffalo's future. The vision for Black Rock is consistent with this comprehensive approach to planning.

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Figure 7: Evelyn Vossler, BRR GNPA Co-Chair, makes a presentation on “Why Black Rock Now” to 50 attendees of a Nov. 12, 2008 Community Visioning Meeting for this plan, hosted by the Dearborn Street Community Association.



Figure 8: Meeting participants mark up a base map in order to give suggestions specific to the geographic features and neighborhood characteristics of Historic Black Rock.



Figure 9: A group of BRR GNPA Housing Committee members, led by Chairwoman Mary Ann Kedron, survey housing conditions along Tonawanda Street in April, 2008, an example of first-hand fieldwork research conducted for this plan.

are the key to both the development of the plan and its successful implementation has been essential premise.

The plan draws inspiration and guidance from the citizen-conceived “Shared Vision for Historical Black Rock’s Dearborn Street Community Association.” This vision (see page 1) was developed in meetings with the residents of Dearborn Street Community Association with the assistance of Phil Haberstro, Executive Director of the Buffalo Wellness Institute in the summer of 2008. It guided the formulation of the geographic boundary of the study area as well as key priorities in the plan. In addition, its comprehensiveness and focus on healthy living make it consistent with the guiding principles of the *Buffalo Comprehensive Plan*.

Consultations of Experts and Best Practices

However, vision needs to be backed up with excellence in strategy, and this was obtained through many months of consultation with experts in the fields of architecture, historic preservation, planning, urban design, and real estate. Representatives from organizations like the Partners for a Livable Western New York, the Elmwood Village Association, Clinton Brown Associates, Buffalo State College, Wendel Duchscherer Architects & Engineers, PC and the City of Buffalo Office of Strategic Planning contributed ideas in support of excellence in strategy.

Public Participation

Significant public participation in the formulation of the plan was achieved through a widely-publicized Community Meeting on November 12, 2008 at St. John’s United Church of Christ, at 85 Amherst Street right in the heart of Historic Black Rock. With 50 attendees and using a well-organized program of presentations and roundtable discussions, significant public input was obtained. Finally, transparency and open communication was guaranteed by the process of placing all documents from the November 12 meeting online and inviting comment on them from interested parties via a public internet web site: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/plan_black_rock/ After the November 12 meeting, additional comments were received. (See Appendices 1-3.)

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First-Hand Fieldwork Research

In addition to expert and local community consultations, first-hand fieldwork research was undertaken to analyze housing, commercial, parks and recreation, community facilities, and problem properties.

Background Studies

Existing proposed or completed plans were identified and assessed, so that this community plan could coordinate with upcoming and established planning initiatives. (See Appendix 7)

Community Knowledge

Finally, knowledge of nearby communities has helped as planning efforts focused on what Historic Black Rock is and why it is important. Through the Black Rock-Riverside GNPA planning process, the strengths and advantages of other communities in the Black Rock-Riverside GNPA is well-known to planners and as a result it became possible to fully articulate and assert the uniqueness of Historic Black Rock, knowing that other communities have their unique advantages which will serve them well in planning efforts involving them in the near future.

Goals of the Planning Process

The planning principles that have guided development of this plan and its goals are a reflection of all the above sources and research, plus guidance provided in *Buffalo's Comprehensive Plan*. These include:

- Keeping the community's vision for itself at the forefront of plan work and recommendations.
- Identifying the future strength of the area as being in the "Historic Black Rock" brand name.
- Basing the image of the community on its historic past, for which innovation, industry, a waterfront orientation and a sense of community are the main characteristics.
- Working with complementary initiatives and organizations active in Historic Black Rock, to sustain recent gains and transform that energy into a successful plan.
- Preserving, restoring and promoting the area's historic assets.
- Taking a fresh look. This community has existed a long time and it lives on within the context of a city which has experienced significant social and economic change in the recent and

enduring past. Rather than relying on long-held assumptions, the planning process has consistently followed a "show me" approach to planning analysis — i.e. "Why Black Rock Now?" — seeking out new ideas and fresh interpretations of existing conditions.

- Supporting interventions resulting from this plan that promote a vital urban neighborhood experience for all who live, work, visit, and play in Historic Black Rock.
- Using the I-190 and Scajaquada Expressway highways as resources for commercial development, not merely obstacles, until the day when this infrastructure is replaced by transportation features that are community-friendly.
- Making the neighborhood safe and easy for people to get around in.
- Creating new housing opportunities while strengthening rehabilitation of existing and frequently historic homes and buildings.
- Addressing the presence of negative influences on quality of life, like vacant properties, blight and crime.
- Acting in concert with the sound planning principles found in *Buffalo's Comprehensive Plan* and in strong collaboration with the Black Rock-Riverside GNPA process.

Outline of the Plan

This plan has five chapters and seven appendices. This chapter, Chapter 1 - "Overview", provides the Vision for Historic Black Rock, the planning context and related topics, and the Goals of the Planning Process. Chapter 2, "Why Black Rock Now," details why Historic Black Rock is worth preserving and improving. Chapter 3, "Recommendations," put forth a series of action steps to guide stabilization and future growth in Historic Black Rock. Chapter 4, "Plan Implementation," sequences future actions, identifies key partners, and sets forth next steps for each action. Chapter 5, "Funding," identifies funding sources and programs which may help implement the recommended actions. Finally, a complete Appendix provides key documents on publicity, public participation, maps, demographics and other plans and projects.



Figure 10: "You Is Are My Best Friend", a child's sidewalk chalk message found during the April, 2008 survey of housing conditions.