

### CHAPTER 3: RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 4. Revitalize Niagara Street Commercial Area, and Develop and Market the Area's Positive Attributes

*From the Vision Statement:*

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.

#### CHALLENGES

The Niagara Street commercial area is a key component of Historic Black Rock. From the earliest days of settlement, the Niagara Street commercial area has provided income, jobs, goods, services, and enhancements to the quality of life of visitors and residents alike.

#### Infrastructure Changes Affect Community Character Over Time

However, the Niagara Street commercial area is not the same as it was in the 19th or 20th centuries. Major transportation infrastructure has been added to the neighborhood, especially with the 1950s addition of the I-190 between Niagara Street and the waterfront. Its impact on community life as a barrier between the community and the waterfront has been mitigated somewhat in recent years by recent waterfront park and recreational trail development. However, the area has not appeared to realize a long-time goal of using the highway's presence as a way to increase local business activity.

Along Niagara Street itself, the street has evolved

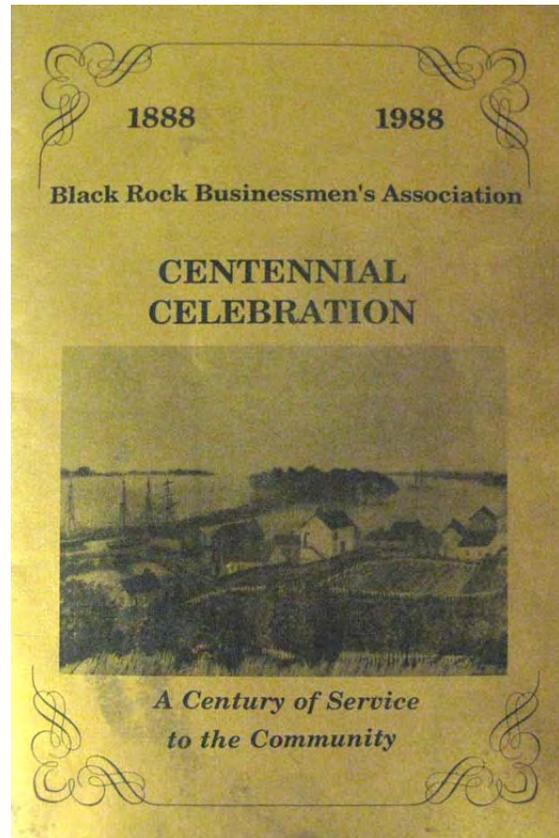


Figure 31: Twenty years ago, the Black Rock Businessmen's Association celebrated 100 years of service to the community, as one of the area's oldest known business associations. However, it no longer meets regularly. A revitalized business association can help create the organizational and planning capacity needed to bring improvements to Niagara Street.

from its origins as a dirt street into a major thoroughfare, with two lanes in each direction running north-south separated by a double yellow line. Niagara Street now serves as a snow evacuation route, bus service route, truck route, and "principal arterial" for the purposes of road classification. However, speeding traffic and a need for street features to help enhance multiple modes of travel on Niagara Street are community concerns based on feedback from the November



Figure 32: A series of photos were taken in front of the Riverview Restaurant to create this panoramic view showing healthy business enterprises amidst the rich architectural legacy of Historic Black Rock.

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Figure 33: Litter and overgrown weeds on a sidewalk in this photo taken in November, 2008 illustrate a need for a beautification activities along Niagara Street.

12, 2008 Community Meeting. Suggestions included reconstructing Niagara Street between Bridge and Arthur Streets and incorporating bike lanes, lighting, old-style street lamps, curbs, sidewalks, planters, traffic calming measures, reduced lanes, signage, and coordinated traffic lights, all to keep the business district “walking friendly” and bike friendly.

### Need for Active Business Association

Commercial activity on Niagara Street trends upward and downward. Based on a January, 2008 inventory of properties, Niagara Street can be characterized as a healthy neighborhood business zone with many opportunities for improvement. It is a mixture of small, midsize, and larger commercial enterprises, some local and some part of national corporations.

However, it appears that there is no current regularly-meeting business association for Niagara Street in Historic Black Rock. This is a key weakness that should be immediately addressed. A functional business association will make it possible for improvements for Niagara Street in Historic Black Rock to be planned effectively with adequate community support. It will also help individual businesses work together to attract and retain business customers to Niagara Street. Part of attracting and retaining customers is giving them an interesting place to be as they conduct their business. This plan recommends that, in addition to re-establishing an active business association along Niagara Street, businesses work together to first assess business strengths along Niagara Street, then segment the street into identifiable and marketable parts (see Figure 34 for a Preliminary

Segmentation Study), and then build within the business association the organizational and planning capacity to bring about urban design and infrastructure improvements to Niagara Street, as well as ensuring simple but critical tasks like sidewalk cleanliness are taken care of. (For more discussion of urban design and infrastructure improvements for Niagara Street, see the next section, “5. Enhance Community Walkability while Leveraging Existing Transportation Advantages.”)

### CURRENT STATUS

Several major employers are located along the Niagara Street commercial corridor in Historic Black Rock, defined as being between Tonawanda and Ontario Streets. These include DiVal Safety and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. DiVal Safety has its headquarters at 1721 Niagara Street and identifies itself as “a premier safety distributor in the United States.” The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ Buffalo District employs approximately 300 people in seven offices across three states and has a campus of offices and operations facilities in Historic Black Rock at 1776 Niagara Street. The Buffalo District is one of the corp’s 41 subordinate districts throughout the US.

Local businesses are also prominent. Examples include: professional offices like peter j. smith & company, a full service urban design, urban and regional planning, and economic development firm with offices at 1888 and 1896 Niagara Street; marine retailers like Brobeil Marine and Obershiemer’s Sailor Supply; restaurants like Angie’s Pizza House and Restaurant and the Riverview Restaurant; and long-standing family-owned businesses like “Peter W. Eberz & Son, Est. 1898” at 1901 Niagara Street.

However, Niagara Street can certainly be a stronger commercial corridor than it is today. The potential to draw additional customers is evident, in light of the architectural, historical, and recreation/waterfront assets of the area and the busyness of the nearby highway, which averages a daily traffic count of 70,000 vehicles and offers easy on-and-off ramps to Niagara Street. This plan suggests a number of ways to strengthen the commercial corridor and market the area to visitors, residents, and customers alike.

### STRATEGIES

#### Key Immediate Strategies (1-2 Years):

# HISTORIC BLACK ROCK: WAR OF 1812 BICENTENNIAL COMMUNITY PLAN



## Commercial Area - Preliminary Segmentation Study

Comprehensive and Community Planning  
 City of Buffalo Office of Strategic Planning  
 11/13/2008

- Commercial - Historic
- Commercial - Plaza
- Currently Commercial (North of Bridge St.) or Industrial (South of Bridge St.)
- Mixed Use Residential-Commercial
- Highway
- Highway\_Ramp
- Sewer
- Railroad

Figure 34: This preliminary segmentation study of Niagara Street commercial corridor divides it into 4 major segments, from north to south: Commercial-Plaza, Mixed Use Residential-Commercial, Commercial-Historic and Commercial-Industrial.

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### Commercial

1. Revitalize business association activities on Niagara Street and encourage participation of local businesses.
2. Hold educational sessions/distribute brochure-newsletter/do articles on good practices like the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street Four-Point Approach™, Why Elmwood Works initiative, the Erie Niagara Framework for Regional Growth, local economic development-related programs, and area advantages like demographics and neighborhood recreational and cultural attractions. For example, storefront businesses should have attractive, appealing signage above the street windows, which should be maximum open to show displays of the goods and/or services available in that store. Other examples: cleanliness, beautification, promoting/marketing the district to outside patrons, nourishing a sense of community within the neighborhood, façade improvements, and repairing the urban fabric.
3. Explore the benefits of looking at Niagara Street in terms of market segments.
4. Support transportation-related improvements that will positively impact Niagara St. (see the next section, "5. Enhance Community Walkability while Leveraging Existing Transportation Advantages.")
5. Address public safety needs of visitors (see section 3)

### Marketing

1. Start community public interest activities, eg garden walks, health fairs, farmer's markets,

home buyer seminars, business days with discounts, school and community center open houses.

2. Seek funding. A 501c3 corporation can receive loans and grants.
3. Develop branding. If Black Rock is to return to its original village layout, the community must have its own identifying brand as is the case of the Allentown or Elmwood communities.
4. Market Niagara St.'s easy highway access and being minutes to downtown.
5. Build off of opportunities presented by Ed Hogle's project (Rock Harbor Commons at Rock Harbor Village)

### Longer Term Strategies (2-5 Years):

#### Commercial

1. Open up more storefront businesses with attractive signage.
2. Research existing programs. promote development of new programs, and help in implementation of programs that help finance improvements that encourage business development and growth. Examples include signage, low interest loans, tax abatement, and façade improvement.
3. Encourage development/expansion of commercial services that accommodate incidental business that arrives from visitors so it can become destination business.

#### Marketing

1. Sponsor community festivals in parks or along one or a series of closed-off streets with community service groups and businesses renting tables.



1870s



Today

Figure 35: Walkability: On the left is a photo of Niagara Street in the 1870s, with travel slow and difficult for both pedestrians and horse and buggy. On the right is Niagara Street in 2008; travel is greatly improved for cars, but pedestrians and bicyclists receive insufficient protection due to factors like the absence of traffic calming measures, faded crosswalks, and no bike lanes.

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2. Promote maritime activities: boating, birding, fishing, etc.
3. Use multicultural past and present as an impetus to organize events, festivals, goods and services that bring the neighborhood together.
4. Leverage direct bike path/multi-use trail connections to downtown, Tonawandas, and Scajaquada Pathway.
5. Take steps to attract immigrants, yuppies, risk-takers, students, artists, musicians, craftspeople.

### 5. Enhance Community Walkability while Leveraging Existing Transportation Advantages

*From the Vision Statement:*

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.

### CHALLENGES

Previous discussion (see page 21) has described the addition of major transportation infrastructure in Historic Black Rock and its effect on the community. This trend may not be over. The Ambassador Bridge has been proposed for this neighborhood and it is important to note that such a facility will include many negative impacts should it be built as proposed. (For more on this, see "Private international bridge stalled by lack of government support" in the 10/14/08 *Buffalo News*.)

It is important to also address local street improvements. Recent legislation passed by the Buffalo Common Council emphasizes the need for "Complete Streets" to be incorporated as part of improvements to street infrastructure in the City of Buffalo in the future. Complete Streets are defined as "facilities that are designed and operated to enable safe access for all users. Persons with disabilities, pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and transit riders are able to safely move along and

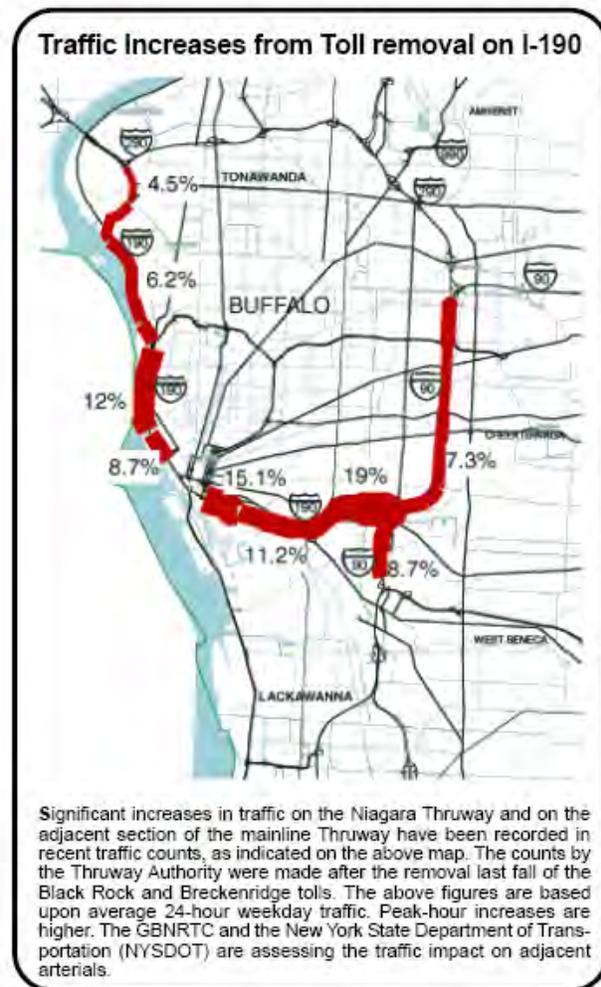


Figure 36: This map and article from a 2007 newsletter of the Greater Buffalo-Niagara Transportation Council (GBNRTC) describes the impact of the removal of the tolls at Black Rock: highway traffic volume has increased. This may lead to lower traffic volume on local roads like Niagara Street..



Figure 37: Traveler services are advertised for Exit 15 on the I-190, just one exit north from those for Historic Black Rock, but not for Historic Black Rock's Niagara St. exits, even though fuel, dining, and boat launch services are available. Adding these traveler services signs for Historic Black Rock's exits should be investigated.

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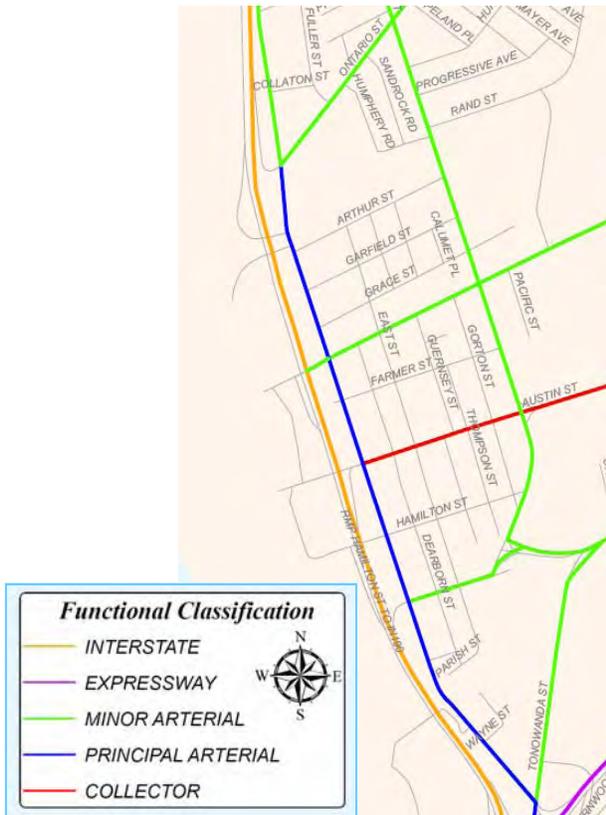


Figure 38: Niagara Street has a functional classification of “Principal Arterial” based on this September, 2007 map prepared by GBNRTC; however, the opportunity to calm traffic due to lower traffic volume caused by removal of the Black Rock tolls should be investigated.

across a complete street.” Such features contribute to a walkable neighborhood, which is one of the advantages of Historic Black Rock and its Niagara Street commercial corridor. However, as illustrated in Figure 35, improvements are necessary to Niagara Street and other streets in Historic Black Rock to meet this standard of travel.

To further enhance the walkability and community-oriented features of the area, many streetscape improvements are needed as well.

**CURRENT STATUS**

Removal of the Black Rock toll barrier has resulted in higher highway traffic volumes on the I-190, as illustrated in Figure 36. This may make measures to calm traffic on Niagara Street more feasible from a transportation planning perspective, because the shift of traffic to highway may result in lower traffic volumes on local streets like Niagara Street.

With increasing costs for vehicle fuel, maintenance,

and the vehicles themselves, an intact urban housing and commercial fabric is becoming more widely recognized as desirable assets.

Encouraging a variety of transportation choices, and putting infrastructure into effect that supports those choices, is more important today than ever.

Historic Black Rock is well-positioned to lure new “cultural tourism” visitors who will come to see and enjoy local history, culture, architecture and waterfront recreational opportunities. At the same time, excellent highway access and traveler services offered by the many entrances and exits for the highway in Historic Black Rock presents an opportunity to marketing convenience to travelers-by on the highway.

**STRATEGIES**

**Key Immediate Strategies (1-2 Years):**

1. Support research into the feasibility and positive transformative effects of changing Niagara St., or portions of it, “from a 4-lane route to a 3-lane street”. This would calm traffic, improve walkability, and stimulate shopper activity in the business corridor. Design alternatives include adding a turning lane in the middle along with bike lanes at each curb or angled parking or median or other appropriate configuration. Niagara Street is managed and maintained by the City of Buffalo, while at the same time serving as a NYS numbered route, truck route, snow emergency route, and bus route. A request for a traffic simulation study should be made to the Greater Buffalo-Niagara Transportation Council, so that a study can analyze the effects of changes to the design of Niagara St. or portions of it in early 2009.
2. Explore additional traffic calming measures in the neighborhood, for example by timing traffic signals, posting speed limit signs, incorporating textured crosswalks in paving, developing roundabouts.
3. Plan and implement streetscape improvements at key intersection, gateway, and commercial and cultural corridors in Historic Black Rock:
  - ✓ Key Gateway Intersection: Niagara & Amherst
  - ✓ Other Gateways: Niagara & Tonawanda, Tonawanda & Amherst, Tonawanda & Hertel, and Niagara & Ontario.
  - ✓ Commercial Corridor: Niagara Street

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Figure 39: A map of existing transportation features which also shows suggested improvements to enhance community walkability while leveraging existing transportation advantages.

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- ✓ Cultural Corridor: Amherst Street
- 4. Block grant funds can provide an improved street infrastructure, consisting of brighter street lighting, plantings, trees, benches, 5. gardens, sidewalks, security cameras, and perhaps a clock on alternate corners.
- 6. Integrate a public art component into streetscape improvements.
- 7. While planning improvements, keep existing streetscape and transportation infrastructure maintained to ensure pedestrian safety.
- 8. Add highway signage to the I-190 that advertises traveler services in Black Rock. (See Figure 37. ) With approximately 70,000 vehicles travelling the highway past Historic Black Rock, these signs could let travelers know of convenient services while also bringing business to Niagara St.
- 9. Black Rock-Riverside GNPA has voted against erecting the Ambassador Bridge at this site.
- 10. Add signage to effectively inform travelers as to highway entrances, neighborhood gateways, park entrances, historic and cultural attractions, and other neighborhood amenities.

### Longer Term Strategies (2-5 Years):

1. Converting Niagara Street to a 3-lane street may create a need for more off-street parking. Investigate use of vacant lots, out-of-business commercial lots, and recent demolitions sites as possible off street parking opportunities.
2. Investigate the feasibility of relocating the I-190 inland to the Tonawanda Rail Corridor.
3. Encourage the use of mass transit.

## 6. Realize the Potential of Existing Recreational Assets and Seize Opportunities for New Ones within the Neighborhood (Parks, Recreation, Waterfront)

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 the 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.

### CHALLENGES

Matching up the community to its parks, trails,

Riverwalk and Seaway Trail, recreational resources, and waterfront is an imperative for Historic Black Rock. While the park, trail, and scenic route development has improved access to the waterfront for the community since the placement of the I-190 on the old Erie Canal and towpath in the 1950s, some planning issues remain. As of this writing, park projects remain incomplete at each of the three major park sites: Squaw Island Park, Tow Path Park, and the Ontario Street Boat Launch/Cornelius Creek Park. In addition, the Riverwalk and Seaway Trail appear to be underutilized opportunities to promote the scenic beauty of the area. Wayfinding signage could be improved in many areas leading to the parks.

It is also important to continue the planning process to seize opportunities to further create existing recreational assets in the community. Zoning guidelines associated with the Smart Code movement, for example, support the creation of neighborhood greenspaces/parks at a higher level of density within residential neighborhoods than is seen in Historic Black Rock today. Such innovations are implementable as vacant parcels become available due to demolition of problem property: For example, create a Black Rock Heritage Park at Dearborn & Hamilton within the residential fabric of the community. (See Figure 42.)

Finally, it is important that upcoming projects for land along the waterfront adhere to local, state, and federal plans and regulations.

### CURRENT STATUS

Improvements are 90% complete at Tow Path Park, awaiting funding for Phase II at Squaw Island Park, and proposed for the Ontario Street Boat Launch/Cornelius Creek Park. Buffalo Riverkeepers is anticipating funding to revitalize the Riverwalk area, including the former toll plaza site, the Naval Yard site, and Rich Marina. Anticipated funding will also support preparation of a feasibility study for the improvements proposed as part of the Black Rock Canal Park concept for the Ontario Street Boat Launch/Cornelius Creek Park.

### STRATEGIES

#### Key Immediate Strategies (1-2 Years):

1. Support completion of planned improvements to Squaw Island Park, Tow Path Park, and the Ontario Street Boat Launch/Cornelius Creek Park.

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Figure 40: A map of existing parks, playfields, and recreational land, and waterfront land uses.

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2. Support creation and maintenance of clean, safe parks and microparks, and access to same: For example, establish Black Rock Heritage Park at 269 Dearborn at Dearborn & Hamilton, within the residential fabric of the community.
3. Have successful community volunteer involvement in maintenance of parks and their features.
4. Promote waterfront development that is consistent with local, state, and federal plans and regulations.
5. Add desirable community features into parks, microparks, scenic trails, etc., like lighting, seating furniture, wi-fi, game tables, skate spots, bubblers, water fountains, etc., without creating neighborhood nuisance behavior.

### Longer Term Strategies (2-5 Years):

1. Promote safety in the parks.
2. Improve use of the parks.
3. Facilitate new improvements to parks.
4. Support new recreational trails/bike paths and greenway connections, and expansion and improvement of existing ones, like the Sca-

jaquada Creek Bike Path, Seaway Trail, Riverwalk, to link parks/recreational assets to themselves and to other neighborhoods.

## 7. Make Distinctive Gateways and Street Themes, Leverage Land Development, and Improve Urban Design

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### CHALLENGES

From a planning perspective, a harmonious quality of life can be facilitated by improvements to the



Figure 41: This building at Hamilton and Niagara Streets has an interesting sign on its back wall harkening back to the days of the Erie Canal, when the building was an all-purpose hardware store. If legal and feasible, restoration of this sign would improve awareness of the Erie Canal heritage of Historic Black Rock to passersby on the I-190, which was built atop the Erie Canal ROW.

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built environment as well as the social environment. However, just as more neighborhood planning is needed for communities like Historic Black Rock to realize their full potential, so is good design in the built environment. Projects involving architecture, engineering and design should work themselves in complementary ways into the existing urban fabric. Context is key, and in Historic Black Rock the context is historic architecture of good quality. However, a tour of the neighborhood yields many examples, with increasing frequency of late, of non-contextual design and work incorporating inexpensive materials of modest quality. Further, vacant lots create an appearance of blight. Finally, unutilized brownfields along the rail corridors present both untapped land development opportunities and public safety problem areas.

### CURRENT STATUS

There are many gateways into Historic Black Rock, and Niagara Street is a major local thoroughfare. Interesting opportunities can even be found along the Thruway to showcase Historic Black Rock to visitors and passers-by on the I-190 (see Figure 41). In addition, efforts underway to recognize the historic character of the area, plus the preponderance of buildings constructed in eras of strong design and quality materials, help make the case that creating attractive buildings and other community features are worth the trouble and investment.

A number of prominent organizations responsible for planning in strong local commercial corridors (Elmwood Village Association), neighborhoods (East Delavan Good Neighbors Planning Alliance), and project areas (The Larkin District) have all advocated for design guidelines and improved zoning regulations. While site plan review by the Zoning and Planning Boards is part of the existing rules and regulations governing development in the city, innovative tools like design guidelines and improved zoning regulations are also available and are not currently used in Buffalo. These could serve to further protect neighborhood character and themes while also making it easier to build with any eye toward context. In a similar manner that other parts of Buffalo seek to use these tools, they and other special district designations should be used to protect the historic and architectural fabric of Niagara Street and Historic Black Rock.

### STRATEGIES

#### Key Immediate Strategies (1-2 Years):

1. Advocate for the development of design standards, zoning regulations, and special designations that protect the neighborhood character of Historic Black Rock. Work with the City of Buffalo and community stakeholders to effect these positive changes.
2. Plan streetscape and infrastructure improvements along the Niagara Street commercial corridor, at key gateways, and along the cultural corridor on Amherst St. between Niagara and Tonawanda Sts. (See section 5: "Enhance Community Walkability while Leveraging Existing Transportation Advantages".)
3. Add and customize, to the extent practicable, wayfinding signage, transit shelters, street furniture, bike racks, to leverage visual cues emanating from the neighborhood and its history.
4. Support Tonawanda Street Corridor Brownfield Opportunity Area project, so that developable land along the Tonawanda and Chandler Street rail corridors can be created and employment growth and demand for local goods and services follows.
5. Expand park, garden and greenspace opportunities, taking advantage of emerging vacant lots.
6. Develop a vacant lot beautification program in residential areas that incorporates topsoil, trees, grass and attractive fencing.
7. Monitor major planning initiatives and promote public participation opportunities involving them.
8. Ensure plan provisions are consistent with the *Buffalo Comprehensive Plan* and City initiatives and policies.

#### Longer Term Strategies (2-5 Years):

1. Develop partnerships with Department of Economic Development, Permits and Inspection Services and Office of Strategic Planning on problem properties, demolitions, foreclosed properties, and maintenance and reuse of vacant properties.
2. Monitor land development so that complementary projects can be built into them at an early stage. For example, as roads are rebuilt, add bike lanes and other features where appropriate to facilitate multimodal transportation choices.
3. Promote sustainable improvements that are practicable when existing resources are improved and new assets are developed. (See page 46 for examples.)
4. Suggest universal accessibility be considered in all planning and design activities.