



Shaping Business Growth Across Auburn



Attracting and retaining small business entrepreneurs, especially in the knowledge and creative sectors, takes a different approach to economic development. Successful communities no longer solely focus on creating a friendly business climate. Many have found that they must devote some of their resources to creating the kind of environment that innovative people find interesting. The major proponent of this, Richard Florida, wrote recently that creative centers are not thriving due to traditional economic reasons such as access to transportation routes, tax breaks or fiscal incentives. "They are succeeding largely because people want to live there. The companies follow the people – or, in many cases, are started by them."¹¹

By the same token, these people, the ones who will start and staff Auburn's 21st century economy must have places where they want to work. Indeed, many people today mix their home and work lives. We live in a world where creativity has become a 24 hour a day / seven day a week endeavor. The founders of tomorrow's successes may not want to commute that far from home. And they may want to take a break midday or in the evening to catch a show or meet friends in a coffee shop before heading back to work.

That is the reality facing Auburn today. Many parts of Auburn contribute to commerce. In addition to downtown, there are small neighborhood retail areas and large suburban style strip malls. The city's Technology Park is home to various industries, which, by design, tend to have a green focus. Together, these must work to reinforce Auburn's historic character, urban fabric and sustainable values.

¹¹ Florida, Richard, "Cities and the Creative Class", *City and Community*, March 2003, page 9.



Coordinating and shaping the growth of these areas is important to maintaining them over time. The city needs to provide a consistent vision for various commercial areas as well as downtown. All members of the community, including businesses, will benefit from a growth plan that protects the investment of property owners by ensuring all adhere to the same quality standards.

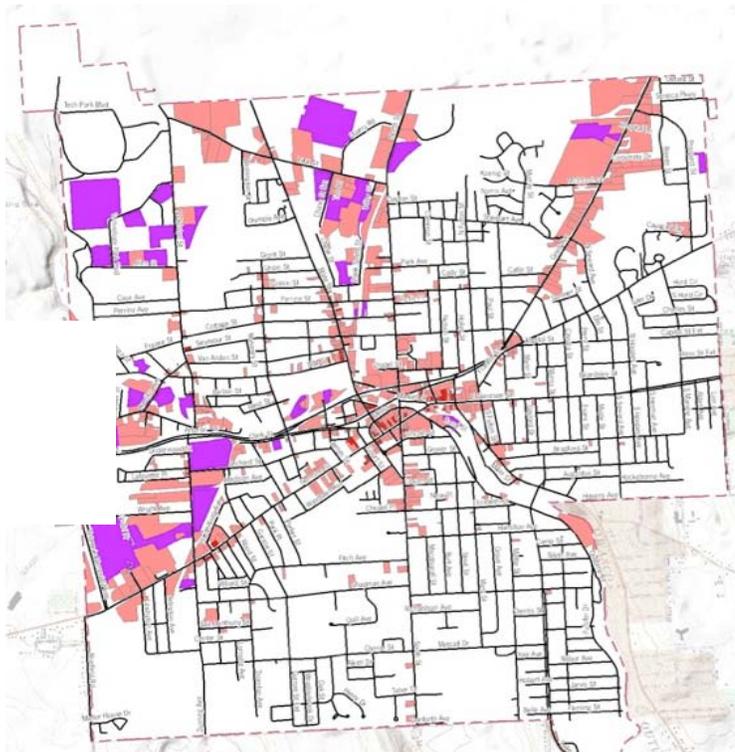
Not surprisingly, a large part of Auburn's land area – 16.9 percent or 778 acres – is devoted to commerce.

Land Use Designation	Area (acres)	Pct. of Auburn
Commercial	533.05	11.6%
Downtown Commercial	9.67	0.2%
Industrial	235.64	5.1%

This area is distributed across the city as shown in the map below. The two red colors indicate commercial plots of land and the purple shows existing industrial parcels as of the middle of 2008. (The city assessor determines designations.)

Commercial and Industrial land in Auburn

- Commercial
- Downtown Commercial
- Industrial



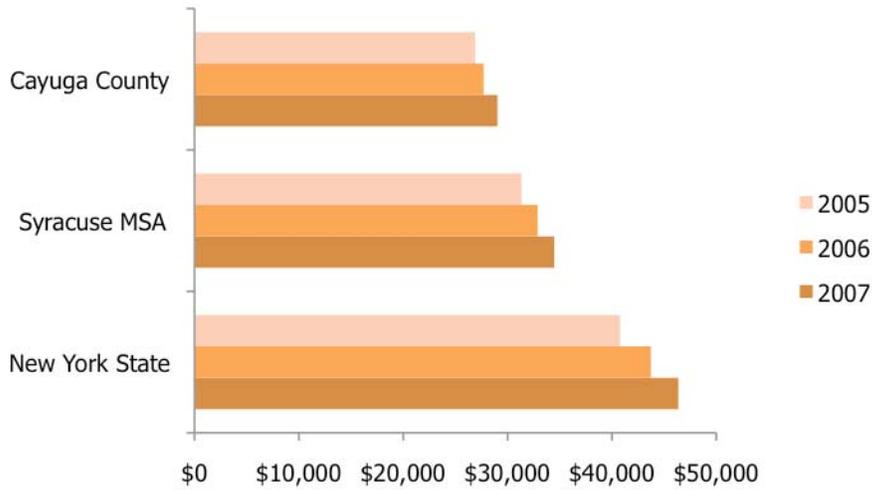
There is not a lot of up-to-date economic data about cities the size of Auburn. The 2000 Census, along with the New York State Department of Labor and the federal Bureau of Economic Analysis has some interesting information that bears keeping



in mind as the city plans its economic and land use future. Most of these numbers are regional in nature, not Auburn specific.

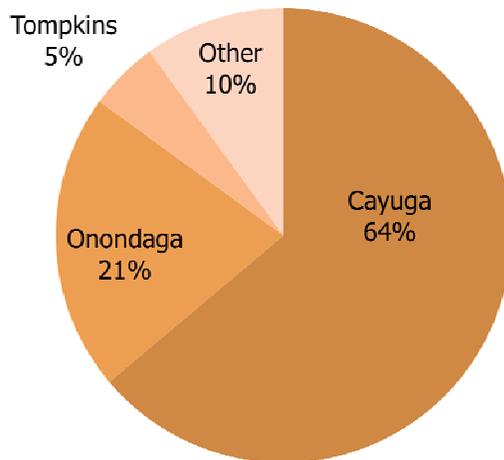
Per capita income – 2005 to 2009

(Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis)



Cayuga County Residents – County of Work, 2000

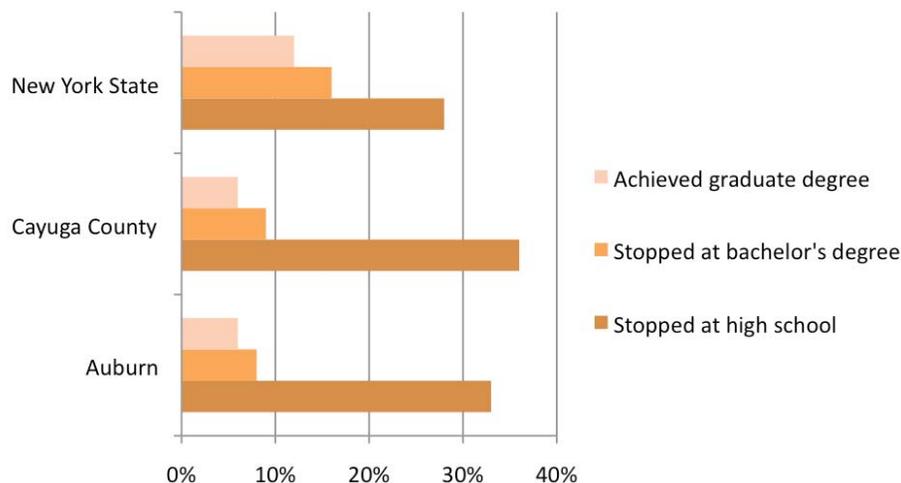
(Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis)





Highest Education Level – People aged 25 and older

(Source: U.S. Census 2000)



Industrial Distribution of Businesses

(Source: US Census Bureau, 2000)

Industry	City of Auburn	Cayuga County	New York State
Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, and mining	0.6%	3.9%	0.6%
Construction	3.5%	6.1%	5.1%
Manufacturing	18.1%	18.6%	10.0%
Wholesale trade	3.2%	3.3%	3.4%
Retail trade	14.0%	12.1%	10.5%
Transportation and warehousing, and utilities	3.7%	5.1%	5.5%
Information	1.0%	1.5%	4.1%
Finance, insurance, real estate, and rental and leasing	3.3%	3.4%	8.8%
Professional, scientific, management, administrative, and waste management services	5.6%	5.2%	10.1%
Educational, health and social services	24.9%	22.8%	24.3%
Arts, entertainment, recreation, accommodation and food services	6.8%	5.9%	7.3%
Other services (except public administration)	5.7%	4.9%	5.1%
Public administration	9.6%	7.2%	5.2%



There are numerous challenges facing businesses in Auburn. Some have to do with the regional economy and are beyond the scope of this project – and require the city's cooperation with other municipalities, counties and New York State. Locally, the challenges that the city can tackle include:

- > Creating a physical environment that is attractive to new businesses
- > Ensuring land for local growth of existing businesses
- > Increasing the sustainability of new and existing developments
- > Improving the appearance of business and commercial areas
- > Better integrating business and commercial areas into the city fabric

A group of business owners came together and identified these and other issues during the comprehensive planning process. Very clearly the group was interested in sustainability, as long as it made sense to the bottom line. As outlined in the goals and strategies below, many of the actions that would make these areas more sustainable will prove to be more cost-effective over the long run. Many also prove to be sustainable from a quality of life perspective and attractive entrepreneurs and workers seeking a place to start or relocate their small to mid-size businesses.

Goal 1. Encourage sustainable development principles in the creation of new commercial parcels and buildings as well as in the renovation of existing commercial parcels and buildings.

Strategy B1 – Require low impact development practices for all large-scale developments in Auburn.

This is a strategy that applies to commercial development as well as residential projects. It is placed in this section because commercial, industrial, retail and office developments can often benefit the most from these practices.

Development patterns based on conventional zoning codes—particularly those for commercial/business parks—often result in sprawl with its associated large impervious areas, loss of natural areas and terrain, and alteration of hydrologic systems. Conventional developments, both residential and commercial, commonly contain wide roads and large parking lots. These large impervious areas prevent water from infiltrating the ground and replenishing groundwater and supporting wetlands and streams. The lack of green space also contributes to the heat island effect making many of these areas inhospitable to people during summer months.

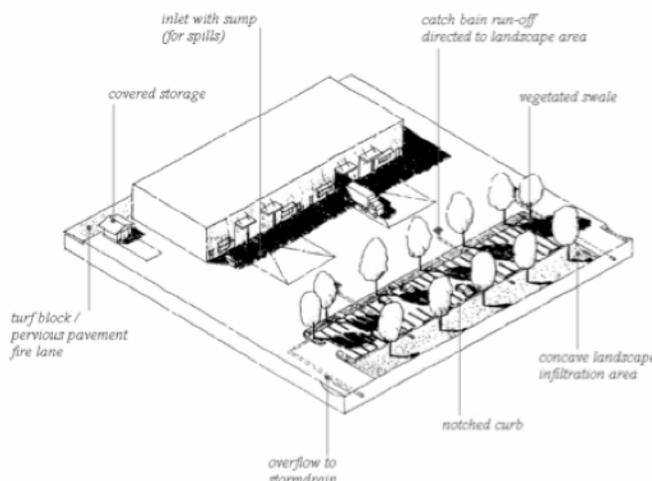
Conventional landscaping brings additional concerns including the introduction of non-native plants, use of herbicides, pesticides and fertilizers, and excessive water consumption. Typically, designers try to deal with water runoff by constructing expensive stormwater controls such as catch basins, pipes and detention ponds.



The more development that exists in an area, the harder it is for natural systems to adapt. New projects – greenfield as well as infill – should have as little impact on the environment as possible. This includes stormwater runoff, water and energy use, sustainable materials, and numerous other elements.

Stormwater runoff is one of the most significant sources of water pollution in New York. During rainstorms, stormwater runoff washes over impervious surfaces, such as roads, parking lots, sidewalks and rooftops – increasing in temperature and carrying pollutants such as phosphorus, nitrogen, oil and grease, and pathogens to rivers, lakes and wetlands. This “nonpoint” source of pollution (named because it does not come out of a single location such as a pipe) can result in degraded water quality, blocked fish passage, fish kills, loss of wetlands, degraded aesthetics, and impaired recreation.

Low Impact Development elements on an industrial park site.
(Source: San Diego County LID Handbook)



Low Impact Development (LID) is a stormwater management approach with the basic principle of modeling nature and mimicking a site's predevelopment water systems. Instead of managing and treating stormwater in large, costly built facilities, LID technology employs small, cost-effective landscape features often located at the lot level. LID allows for development with fewer environmental impacts through smarter designs and technologies that better balance conservation, growth, public health and quality of life. LID benefits the municipality, developer, and general public – through cost savings to developers, smaller burden on municipal infrastructure and reduced pollution to drinking water, recreational waterways and wetlands. Some of the best practices include:

- > Permeable pavers
- > Porous surfaces
- > Tree box planters
- > Green roofs
- > Rain gardens



- > Grassed swales
- > Dense development
- > Native plants
- > Open space conservation
- > Narrower streets
- > Shorter driveways
- > Smaller, better landscaped parking area
- > Storage / reuse of rainwater

Auburn should incorporate LID practices into its business/technology park site design regulations for all future development. More information about Low Impact Development can be found at the Low Impact Development Center, <http://www.lowimpactdevelopment.org/index.html>.

Any developers who choose to go beyond the basic LID regulations should be rewarded. Density bonuses, expediting permitting or tax incentives could be arranged to encourage environmentally sustainable practices.

Strategy B2 – Require “town-center” and walkable designs for new business development including, where appropriate, mixed-uses.

Auburn’s business/technology parks as well as retail commercial and office developments should aim to attract a diverse array of customers, and as such, should be accessible by non-vehicular modes of transportation as well as vehicular. Business development in Auburn should be at an attractive, accessible scale that appears inviting, rather than blank, featureless streetwalls and ambiguous travel spaces.

Town center design, like a traditional Main Street, should incorporate multiple-uses (retail, professional offices, apartments, and civic services) wherever possible, and should tie in to a transportation network of buses where feasible. With offices or apartments above street-level retail, these centers provide for most daily needs and the core of civic and commercial experience.

Employees who work in industrial or technology parks should still feel as if they are part of the urban fabric—not isolated into a single-use corner surrounded by parking. Already many of the people working in the city’s Technology Park seek to leave their building during lunch. They walk for exercise. Others jump in their cars to run errands or have lunch. These trips might be accomplished by foot if appropriate retail or services were allowed. Such amenities will make the park a more pleasant and desirable place to work, which benefits employees as much as employers and developers—and the city as a whole. This can be accomplished by modifying the allowed uses in the zoning code.



It is important that these remain small-scale services designed to handle business in the park and surrounding neighborhood. Care must be taken that productive industrial land not be lost to large-scale commercial growth that could happen elsewhere in Auburn.

Above all, the site plan review process should ensure that the designs for Auburn's business areas are walkable. Any business relationship is with a customer or a client. It is not with a car. While motor vehicles will be around for a long time, it is important that the storage of automobiles not be the dominant design criteria. Even within dedicated technology or business parks, workers still need to get around—sidewalks should be provided and attention should be paid to the overall aesthetic. Auburn's business parks should be seen as part of the city fabric, and not as an afterthought. This in turn will help attract new businesses and with it, new jobs.

Strategy B3 – Revamp minimum parking requirements and require rear building parking

As noted in the Downtown Development chapter, parking can often be an obstacle to the creation of a vibrant space for pedestrians, detracting from an appealing, inviting streetscape appropriate for urban areas. Similarly, more parking means more pavement, which adversely affects stormwater flow and the urban heat island effect.

Too often, the parking required by code is based on peak activity—for instance at the holidays, for retail areas—and thus many spaces go unused for the majority of the year. Currently the parking requirements for all manufacturing, industrial, and warehouse uses is 1 per every two employees; for professional and business offices, three spaces are required for each 1,000 square feet of net floor area. The city should consider reducing these requirements, perhaps even instituting a parking *maximum* rather than a minimum, as some communities have been doing. Similarly, parking should be required to be at the back of the building and not the front. This will ensure that business and technology is still pedestrian friendly and urban in character.

Strategy B4 – Provide a green development checklist in the code to make sure everyone is on the same page

Too often, the idea of sustainable design is vague or merely conceptual, when what's really needed is a specific, tangible description of what is required or recommended by the planning board. Currently, the planning board maintains a relatively standard checklist of items required for site plan review. Items include provisions for pedestrian access, description of the method of securing public water and location, design and construction materials of such facilities, location and proposed design of all buffer areas, including existing vegetative cover, and a general landscaping plan and planting schedule, among others. In order to



promote sustainable design and building practices, green development items should be incorporated into the site plan checklist. Checklist items could include:

- > Use of renewable construction materials
- > Innovative stormwater management
- > Bicycle parking
- > Heat-reducing rooftop materials
- > Water use reduction
- > Indoor air quality improvement

The code should also include language that gives the planning board some idea as to community preferences in such areas. Furthermore, the code should include standards that are consistent with the comprehensive plan.

Strategy B5 – Identify important vacant and industrial sites around the city and encourage their reintegration into Auburn’s economy.

There are numerous vacant industrial properties around Auburn and this land’s economic impact on the city is severe. Auburn is only 8.4 square miles in area and most of that land is highly developed, leaving few “greenfields” available for new commercial or light industrial development. Although numerous businesses express an interest in locating here because of Auburn’s location, access to highways and supportive business climate, many cannot find suitable sites within the city. Making this vacant land available for reuse would be an important economic development component for the city.



The site of the closed Bombardier plant has attracted potential manufacturers. However, the lack of information about the site – assets and liabilities – has hindered city staff efforts to reintegrate it into Auburn’s economy.

As a result, the Auburn must actively seek to redevelop its vacant parcels and recycle former industrial or commercial structures. However, the known and suspected environmental contamination on these brownfield sites complicates redevelopment. *Brownfields* are real property, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant.¹² Former factories, gas stations, and warehouses often result in contaminated soil or hazardous materials. Often, these properties lie vacant because it is too costly for a developer to remediate the site. Ironically, sometimes the sites are not that polluted, but it is cheaper for a property owner to let the land lay fallow rather than risk the cost of a cleanup. This not only detracts from the landscape, but also can be a health and environmental hazard.

Recently, the city started to identify these key parcels by submitting an application for a New York State Brownfields Opportunity Area grant. The application lists the following 14 sites as important for redevelopment:

- > *Former Wadsworth & Son Scythe Factory* - A metalworking factory in operation until the mid-20th century with historic coal and coke usage and oil storage.

¹² U.S. Environmental Protection Agency definition at <http://epa.gov/brownfields/>



- > *Former Henry & Allen Factory (2 parcels)* - A former metal-working factory with a separate machine shop structure, active from the late 1800s until approximately 1970.
- > *Former Auburn Woolen Company* - A factory manufacturing wool products until the mid-1900s.
- > *Former Bowen Manufacturing Facility* - Originally a shoe factory with a nearby pattern maker, the site was later converted to a factory producing grease and oil cups.
- > *Former H.N. Lemon & Co. Factory* - A glove and mitten factory, formerly a shoe factory, with operations including leather tanning and glove making. The factory was demolished in the mid 1900s.
- > *Fay & Bowen Bicycle Spokes and Nipples Factory* - Also a former shoe factory prior to its conversion to cutting, finishing, and fitting bicycle tires, spokes, and nipples.
- > *Everts, Sheldon & Co. Factory* - The factory's operations are unknown and the facility closed prior to 1900.
- > *10 Genesee Street* - highly visible vacant structure with prior use as automotive sales and repair.
- > *296 State Street* - currently vacant with historical use as an automotive repair shop.
- > *1-15 Pulaski Street* - vacant.
- > *72 Seymour Street* - currently vacant with portions used as a parking lot.
- > *144 Clark Street* - auto body repair shop in poor condition, private owner.
- > *151 Orchard Street* - The plant was a large diesel engine and railroad equipment manufacturing facility owned by Bombardier (formerly Alco Power) and was closed in 2006.
- > *40-46 Frazee Street* - largely vacant with a portion leased as a parking lot by the Auburn Foundry Company.
- > *41-55 Washington Street* - former shoe factory that currently houses a utility building; remainder is vacant.

A good example of the potential for these sites could be found in the Bombardier plant (151 Orchard Street), which was closed in 2006, and now sits vacant. A number of manufacturing companies have approached the city about possibly using the site because of its access to rail lines as well as location along the arterial. Unfortunately, coordination with the landowners has been difficult. Creating a plan to reintegrate this site as well as others into Auburn's economy and community could make such discussions easier.



Strategy B6 – Establish systems to monitor potential pollution beyond the boundaries of vacant industrial land.

As in most post-industrial cities, there is concern in Auburn that some vacant manufacturing facilities are contaminated. The fear is based on an understanding that a majority of such sites, in use sometimes for decades, are polluted with various chemicals, solvents, fuel, or other hazardous materials. Over time this contamination can seep through the soil causing adverse health and environmental damage beyond the property lines of the facility.

With various properties still in private hands – and hopes that profitable reuses will eventually be found for such land – there has been no reports about levels, if any of contamination. The city cannot forcibly monitor the pollution directly on such properties, but it might find it prudent to establish monitoring wells on public land surrounding these sites. If contamination is discovered, the city can more quickly work with the landowner (pressure the landowner, if necessary) to remedy the situation. Ultimately, this would help return this land back into Auburn's economy.

Strategy B7 – Institute Dark Sky standards for all non-residential lighting throughout the city including publicly- and utility-owned fixtures.

Auburn's natural beauty is one of its most valuable economic assets. Steps should be taken to preserve it – by day and by night. There are important safety, traffic and quality of life reasons to light our communities at night. Unfortunately, most outdoor lighting installed in recent decades is poorly designed. The lights overlight certain areas and cause overly dark shadows in other areas. The results include:

- > Wasted energy – and a lot of money along with it
- > Light trespass from one property to another causing annoyances or even harming health.
- > Reduced visibility caused by uneven bright spots and dark shadows
- > Concerns about traffic and personal safety from the reduced visibility
- > Poor nighttime ambience – and the loss of rural star-filled skylines

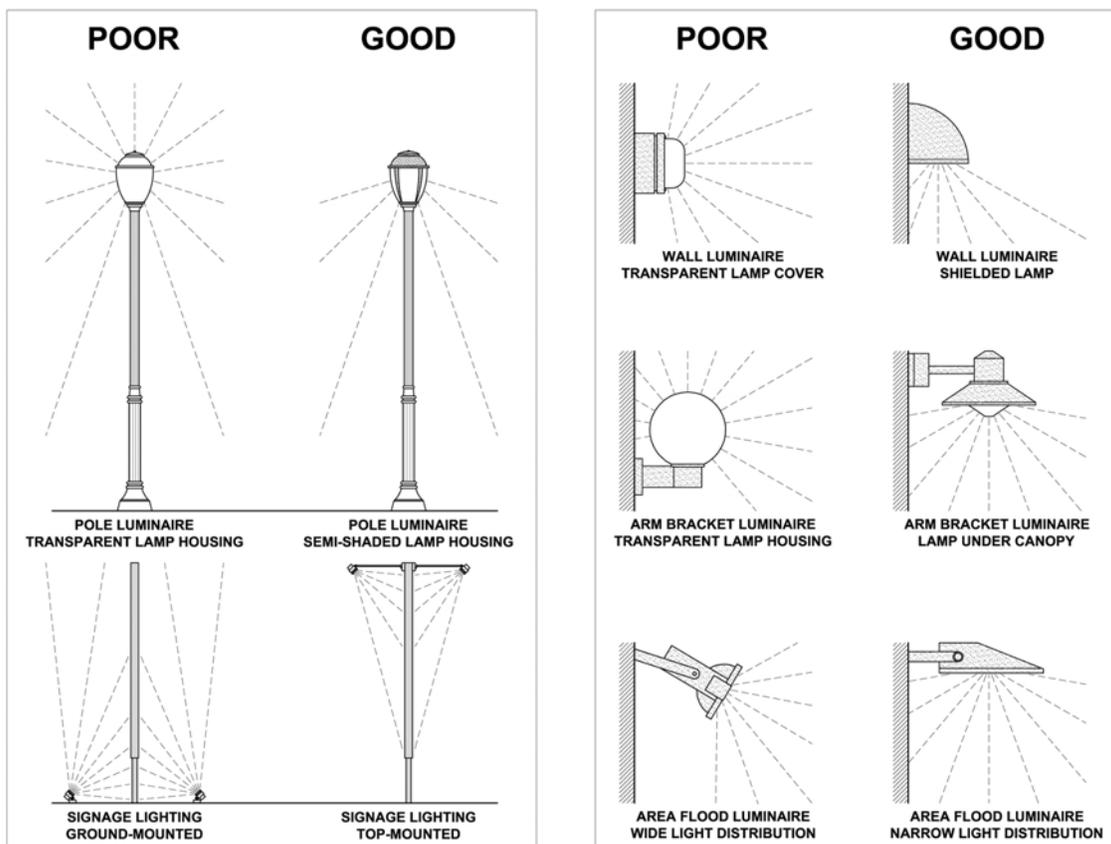
Auburn can reduce these impacts by enacting a "dark sky" ordinance that would reduce the light pollution from street lamps and building fixtures. "Good lighting," as described by the New England Light Pollution Advisory Group and the International Dark-Sky Association, has four principles.

- > Light should be adequate for the intended task, but should never over-light.
- > Lighting fixtures should be fully-shielded, which means they control the light output in order to keep the light in the intended area and not up into the sky.
- > The fixtures are carefully installed to maximize their effectiveness on the targeted property and to minimize adverse effects on neighboring properties.



- > Good lighting uses fixtures with high-efficiency/energy-saving lamps, while still considering the color and quality as essential design criteria.

Additional material that expands upon those principles can be found at the website of the International Dark Sky Association. Sample ordinances from around the nation are at: <http://www.darksky.org/ordsregs/>. Other information on the site will also help developers and property owners work to protect Auburn's natural beauty at night. Educational information, in addition to ordinances, should be part of the application process. The ordinance should also require that all existing fixtures needing to be replaced be done with fixtures that adhere to the new dark sky ordinance. Finally, Auburn should lead by example. All city and county projects should be sure to integrate dark sky standards. Over the long run, such a strategy will prove economically, as well as environmentally, sustainable.



Strategy B8 – Eliminate front yard setback requirements in all commercial districts. Establish build-to lines in the densest districts.

As discussed in the Boosting Downtown chapter, commercial areas with inviting, walkable environments are desirable. However, zoning code often requires a building setback for a front yard. By bringing building frontages up to the sidewalk



rather than setting them back (as is customary in more suburban locations), this creates a unified pathway and designated pedestrian space where there is always something ahead to walk towards. Storefronts are all along the same plane, which is good for both pedestrians and businesses. This can be achieved by eliminating any front yard setback, or, more strongly, by requiring building to the front property line. It also makes it easier for people walking to quickly get on their way from a building without having to traverse a large uncomfortable parking lot.

Strategy B9 – Embrace and implement recommendations outlined in the city’s recently completed energy master plan.

For years, Auburn has developed a leadership role among municipalities in New York State in the arena of energy and environmental strategies. In March 2009 the city along with Cayuga County completed a *Comprehensive Sustainable Energy and Development Plan*. The plan’s preparation included the gathering of over 100 citizens at Cayuga Community College to craft a vision and develop the plan.

The plan established a vision to achieve sustainable energy and economic development – building on the many sustainable success the city has already. It attempts to provide a holistic approach to addressing the diverse range of issues and policies, which lead to integrated solutions for further sustainable economic, energy, and environmental performance. The plan conducted research in eight areas of sustainability. These are:

1. Alternate Energy and Conservation
2. Transportation, Parks and Recreation and Open Spaces
3. Housing, Codes and Policies, Public Spaces
4. Solid Waste Management
5. Agriculture and Food Waste Management
6. Water and Storm Water Management
7. Healthy Schools
8. Business and Economic Development

The project synthesized 42 high priority items and prepared a list of the top 20 challenges. These are:

1. Complete the Auburn wastewater treatment plant bio-digester
2. Complete the Cayuga County solid and water community bio-digester
3. Complete the Cayuga County public utility service centralized bio-digester
4. Initiate the Auburn hydropower projects
5. Create a municipal, low-interest, self-sustaining, green revolving loan fund to assist in financing LEED-certified projects, demand side energy management, weatherization and renewable energy projects.



Case study – Municipalities implement LEED standards

LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) is a system, devised by the U.S. Green Building Council that has become the nationally accepted benchmark for the design, construction, and operation of green buildings. Program details can be found at www.usgbc.org/LEED/

LEED certification in the public sector is increasingly common. Massachusetts and New York require that state construction and renovation projects over 20,000 square feet achieve LEED certification. Since 2004, all new city-owned buildings in Boston had to be certified as LEED silver. New York City and St. Louis require publicly funded projects meet the same criteria. Portland, Oregon set the bar higher – requiring city-owned buildings be LEED Gold certified.

6. Educate / encourage government, individuals and business to conserve energy
7. Develop a marketing campaign to increase Centro-bus system ridership
8. Encourage businesses to establish programs that increase carpooling and the purchase of alternative energy.
9. Increase the municipal use of alternative fuel vehicles
10. Expedite permit and approval processes for sustainable development, redevelopment and improvements.
11. Increase the volume of non-recyclable waste going into the city landfill.
12. Increase and track participation of curbside and drop-off recycling programs.
13. Establish waste reduction, reuse and recycling programs across the county.
14. Encourage business waste reduction, reuse and recycling
15. Continue participation in the project to protect local watersheds and promote phosphorous reduction in fertilizers, detergents and dock soap.
16. Encourage bio-retention facilities and permeable pavements in parking areas.
17. Build awareness of environmental, health and academic benefits of healthy high performance schools among PTO, school employees and students.
18. Undertake a cost-benefit analysis of replacing non-renewable energy on school district campus with wind, solar, geo-thermal energy on greater Auburn school.
19. Encourage residents, business and government to buy and sell local products.
20. Organize a roundtable discussion on "Pathways to Green Collar Jobs" including business, academic institutions, unions and government.

Strategy B10 – Continue infrastructure improvements at Technology Park to support existing and new businesses.

In the early 1990s the city designed a Technology Park with the hopes of offering industrial space to various industries. Currently the Park offers sites that are shovel ready for any number of companies who are looking for space in Auburn. However, the infrastructure has not been upgraded since the initial design and is



now antiquated. In order for the Park to be the economic development tool the City of Auburn sees it for; the Park will not only need aesthetic improvements but also have up-to-date public infrastructure improvements. Currently there is a need to make multiple improvements to Technology Park, which includes but is not limited to street reconstruction, curbing and sidewalks; lighting improvement; as well as sewer and water upgrades. These upgrades are necessary in order for the City to be able to recruit new businesses as well as retain the current businesses that reside in Technology Park.

Strategy B11 – Support the creation of a Finger Lakes Railway Passenger Station in Auburn

A local development group is working with the Finger Lakes Railway to create a stop for passengers in Auburn. The station would be near the current rail crossing on North Street. It is hoped the project would create another Auburn gateway for exploring the Finger Lakes by rail.

Currently the railroad goes through many historic and interesting communities including Canandaigua, Geneva, Watkins Glen and Seneca Falls. In Auburn, the line traverses the city from the Finger Lakes Mall to Grant Avenue.

The proposed Auburn Station would be adjacent to a microbrewery or other restaurant amenity. The facility will start small, with a simple covered boarding area, but have room for expansion as demand increases. Though focused mainly on tourism at first, this will leave options of for a wider variety of passenger traffic including commuters. Depending upon regional transportation needs (as well as external factors such as fuel prices) rail may be an important option linking Auburn with other cities in the region.



Local developers envision a tourism stop along the Finger Lakes Railway in Auburn that acts as a gateway to visitors exploring the region. The small station will sit next to a restaurant as well as other amenities. (Rendering courtesy of KyleCroit Development)



Goal 2: Improve commercial signs so they reflect the character of the city and the character of particular neighborhoods

Signs play an important role in establishing community character. In places where businesses feel the need to compete for attention, signs—too many, too large, too distracting—can create visual chaos and destroy any coherent image a city has worked hard to nurture. Visual clutter is not attractive and can cheapen the feel of the place. In other areas, where ordinances make sure everyone has a fair chance to be noticed, signs can actually enhance the community or district's character – and increase the desirability, and thus commercial potential for everyone.

Many communities get into the bad habit of granting variances for bad signs, allowing sizes, quantities or orientations that would not otherwise be permitted. Over time, these variances can set a precedent that makes it hard (and legally problematic) to start denying variances. The comprehensive plan is the place to rectify that situation. By making a policy statement regarding signs (as outlined in the following strategies) by bringing code into line with these strategies, and by sticking to the code – and by granting no variances to the rules, the city can get sign issues back under control.

Strategy B12 – Signs shall reflect the desired character of the neighborhood in which they are erected

In order to retain appropriate community character, the size of signs and, sometimes, the materials or lighting of signs, must be congruent with the surrounding neighborhood. Sign sizes should vary by district, as should design regulations. For example, smaller signs are more appropriate in downtown and historic districts, and larger signs may be appropriate in more highway-oriented districts. In residential areas, signs should be tightly limited.

Strategy B13 – Discourage pole signs throughout the City, except for the C-3 Highway Commercial areas

Pole signs are suitable for suburban locations and do not convey the image of a vibrant urban center. City regulations should be revised to: (1) review pole signs with regard to economics, aesthetics and compatibility with surrounding communities; (2) grandfather pole signs in specific zoning districts; and (3) eliminate pole signs in more visually sensitive areas over a set period of time.

Strategy B14 – Eliminate changeable signs throughout the city except for movie or performance venues

Changeable signs, whether digital or analog, have been a fixture of suburban roadways for decades. While they may be convenient for businesses to communicate varying messages, the overall effect is distracting and even downmarket, and run counter to the image of a vibrant urban community like Auburn. Signs with letters that can be physically changed look old-fashioned; maintenance can sometimes be an issue, which contributes to an air of decay.



Pole signs scored very poorly in a visual preference survey of residents given during the comprehensive planning workshops.



Electronic/LED signs are designed to attract attention from motorists—but this compromises safety. Such signs are often extremely distracting due to brightness and/or animation.

There are some instances where changeable signs are appropriate—namely, movies and other performance venues. However, these should be the exception rather than the rule.

Strategy B15 – Set stricter set of standards for variances to the sign ordinance

Despite best efforts of a sign ordinance revision, there will be in the future particular pieces of property for which a sign variance is warranted. Any variance should be rare and with signs, exceptions to the ordinance should be very rare. Auburn could set, in its code, a stricter set of standards against which sign variances could be measured.

Variances are often requested because the property owner claims a hardship. A typical example that should be avoided is when a property owner buys an existing building that is setback from its immediate neighbors. The owner might request a variance for a larger-than-allowed-by-code sign to increase visibility. In this circumstance, a variance is not warranted because the property owner knew before the purchase the position of the building and neighboring structures.

Outlining specifically what is allowed and under what circumstances something else might be allowed (very rarely) is important to get everyone on the same page.

Strategy B16 – Prohibit billboards within city limits

Billboards are another advertising strategy that proliferated with the automobile and are, by and large, not in keeping with the nature of Auburn's urban and historic character. Right now the city sign ordinance does not address billboards specifically, but does restrict the size of signs in particular districts. The code should be clear in its definition of billboards and their prohibition.

Strategy B17 – Encourage the protection of historic signs

Auburn residents continually cite the city's rich history as a reason to live here. History is not just limited to historic sites or old buildings. A lot of Auburn's heart and soul lies in its historic signs. The most prominent example is the Genesee Beer sign that is a landmark in downtown Auburn. The city should work with the building owner and the sign owner, if different, to the sign's long term survival as a city landmark.

There may be other signs around Auburn that also warrant such protection. Those should be investigated and any that are important to the city's historic character should be offered appropriate protection and assistance.



Changeable signs are suburban in nature and run counter to the creation of a vibrant, up-market community.



Case Study – Boston’s Citgo Sign



In 1940, the City Services Company mounted a large sign atop a mixed-use building in Boston’s Kenmore Square. The company changed its name to Citgo and in 1965 installed a new sign that has become a beloved part of the Boston skyline.

Photographs of the sign, which had contained more than five miles of neon tube, appear everywhere – postcards, newspapers, movies and tourism brochures. In 1983, Citgo wanted to dismantle the deteriorating structure, but the company was met with an uproar of disapproval. The Boston Landmarks Commission ordered its destruction postponed while the issue was debated. It was never formally declared a landmark, but was eventually refurbished by Citgo, which replaced the neon tubes with energy efficient (and brighter) LED lights.

Today, every night, from dusk till midnight, the sign now serves as a beacon for people navigating around the city. It has become as much a part of the Boston brand as the Red Sox – instantly recognizable and much beloved.



Signs painted directly on buildings, such as on this micro-brewery in Troy, New York, straddle a border between commercial and public art – and add to the urban character of a community.

Strategy B18 – Allow painted signs on building walls

Similar to historic signs, painted signs on building walls can provide a historic or creative feel to a community, which is particularly desirable in Auburn, which strives to be a creative and cultural hub. Already some murals adorn the walls of buildings in the city and commercial signs can often be considered as public art.

However, the zoning code prohibits painted wall signs. The city should provide an option for such signs, subject to review by the Planning Board or other group. Furthermore, the city should explore the potential for connecting local artists with local businesses to create painted wall signs. The Auburn Beautification Commission, which has a Municipal Sign Reduction Initiative, could assist by facilitating these public-private connections.

Strategy B19 – Revise home occupation rules to focus on impact and not use.

Currently in the zoning, Auburn’s home occupation rules include a short list of permitted activities: instruction or counseling, dressmaking, writing or art studio, consulting, babysitting, home crafts and cooking, and rooming. The rules limit the number of people allowed in an instructional or counseling session to six and the number of boarders allowed to two.

At the same time, the rules specifically prohibit some activities: animal hospitals, stables or kennels, auto repair and paint shops, mortuaries, restaurants, private



clubs, and retail sales. The code leaves the power to allow or disallow other uses in the hands of the planning board, which can issue a special permit.

The vagueness and uncertainty in the rules makes it likely that most existing home occupations that are not on this list never come forward for a permit. In fact, it is likely that no one operating a home occupation ever seeks municipal approval. This makes the rules useless at controlling the issues of concern to neighborhoods – noise, traffic, lights, fumes, etc.

Home occupations exist and will continue to do so in many residential areas throughout Auburn. This is a natural by-product of the interconnectedness of the 21st century and the knowledge economy. In fact, it is a desired result as the city seeks creative entrepreneurs; it is likely that more people will have offices in their homes – and visit their customers to consult or construct.

Instead of trying to guess at the occupations people engage in their homes, it is more important to control impacts. The new rules should focus on issues including, but not limited to:

- > Whether signs should be allowed and, if so, what they should look like
- > Ensuring that parking for customers or employees can be handled in a manner consistent with the neighborhood.
- > Banning heavy equipment or non-residential forms of storage (e.g. no parking of backhoes or dump trucks in the driveway.)
- > Requiring that the business produce no noise that can be heard at the property line
- > Regulating outdoor lighting to maintain its consistency with a residential neighborhood

Goal 3: Develop a plan for universal broadband access

Strategy B20 – Research and create a plan for wireless broadband access throughout the city.

In this information age, the provision of broadband Internet connectivity is no longer a luxury—it is a necessity for economic growth. For a community such as Auburn, which is trying to attract and retain a creative class of entrepreneurs, providing universal broadband access would be an attractive amenity that will help it be competitive with other cities. While broadband Internet proliferates in major U.S. cities, often the less wealthy places—both urban and rural—suffer from a lack of investment in the technology, or are faced with prohibitively expensive options. The need for universal broadband access has been discussed at the national and state level. Additionally, “A Call to Action: A Blueprint for our Region’s Future” has identified the implementation of a municipality-wide broadband wireless network as a priority. Auburn should research and develop a plan for universal wireless broadband access. Issues to address include ownership, funding, operation, and partnerships.



Of course, universal broadband access is a relatively new concept, and as such has its share of failures as well as successes. Philadelphia announced it would provide wireless to low-income housing several years ago through the nonprofit Wireless Philadelphia (now called the Digital Impact Group). However, one of its partners pulled out, slowing the effort. A local company has since joined the effort, changing the business model, supporting it with wired infrastructure and “digital inclusion” programs aimed at people who could not afford a computer. While not to the scale originally hoped for, Philadelphia does provide wireless to large areas. Though many large cities have had high profile wireless program failures, smaller cities have enjoyed some success and could be better models.

St. Cloud, Florida, is touted as a Wifi success story. This city of 30,000 annually spends \$600,000 from tax revenues on the network, though an Economic Development Fund grant paid startup costs. Statistics claim that 77 percent of residents take advantage of the free wireless,¹³ though there have been reports of slow connection speeds. Corpus Christi, Texas, began its wireless effort with a proposal by the municipal gas and water companies to automate meter readings. The idea snowballed into a broader plant to improve services and cut costs by migrating time- and paper-intensive work to a wireless network.¹⁴ The public access was almost secondary, but remains in effect and is an often-cited example.

For more on municipal wireless networks, visit:
http://www.wired.com/special_multimedia/2008/st_atlas_1603

Goal 4: Encourage arts and culture as an integral part of Auburn’s economy

Strategy B21 – Support existing (as well as future) future arts and cultural institutions and events.

Arts and cultural institutions are important to local economic development, particularly in a city that desires tourism to be an important component. In Auburn, there are a number of important historic sites and cultural institutions as well as a growing number of other places and organizations that contribute to the arts/culture/tourism economy.

Some of the organizations directly contributing to Auburn’s arts and cultural scene are the:

- > Auburn Public Theater
- > Auburn Schine Theater
- > Cayuga Museum & Case Research Lab
- > Harriet Tubman Home
- > Schweinfurth Memorial Art Center

¹³ <http://www.freepress.net/communityinternet/stcloud>

¹⁴ http://www.heartland.org/publications/infotech%20telecom/article/22176/Corpus_Christi_Show_s_Way_to_Muni_Success.html



- > Seward House Museum
- > Willard Memorial Chapel

In addition, there are many existing and emerging institutions in Auburn and around the county. All together these sites and events contribute significantly to the local economy – particularly in the tourism arena.

Tourism, based upon arts, history and culture – as well as natural beauty – are important economic engines in Auburn and Cayuga County. According to data collected in 2007 and 2008 by the Cayuga County Convention and Visitors Bureau, over 90 percent of visitors to Cayuga County are leisure travelers and the average travel party spends \$387.66 in the county. All together that brings in \$90 million in direct revenues producing about \$5.8 million in local taxes and \$5.73 in state taxes. This translates into tax relief of \$418.78 for every household in the county. The arts and culture in Auburn are and can continue to be an important part of this revenue.

