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# Report to Urban Strategies, Inc.

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Public Participation  
and Community  
Outreach for the  
Highland Avenue -  
Step 2 BOA  
Nomination Study

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University at Buffalo – Center  
for Urban Studies

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January 2009

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# **Report to USI: Community Participation Plan**

## **1.0 Introduction**

The Brownfields Opportunity Areas Program (BOAP) sponsored by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, provides funding for municipalities and community based organizations to develop community wide planning and implementation strategies for redeveloping brownfields. The goal of the project is to formulate and implement a plan for the active participation of Highland Community stakeholders and residents in the *Brownfield Opportunity Area Step Two Nomination Study*.

Public participation is a critical component of any successful brownfield redevelopment project, and residents and stakeholders should be included in all phases of the planning project, and have easy access to information about contamination, clean-up and developmental options. In this way, they can participate more deeply in the process of determining the future land-uses, economic development, environmental protection and neighborhood regeneration options.

The public participation process is especially challenging in distressed, predominately black or Latino communities. A legacy of broken promises, betrayals, and disappointments has made residents and stakeholders cynical and distrustful of city government and outsiders in general. Moreover, in these communities, disconnects often exist between established leaders and stakeholders and ordinary citizens, that can erect a formidable barrier to public participation. Thus, in this setting, only a very aggressive public participation campaign is likely to succeed in getting a representative sample of the population (residents and stakeholders) to participate.

## **1.1 Goals**

- Assist in the establishment of a Steering Committee to provide oversight for the Highland Community BOA
- Build trust and confidence between the community and the project team
- Have residents and stakeholders drive the Step 2 Nomination Study
- Develop a decentralized neighborhood strategy to engage the residents
- Establish a system for distributing information to residents and stakeholders
- Have a representative sample of residents participate in project events, especially public open houses
- Create awareness of the project and the ability of residents to participate fully in the Nomination Study

## **1.2 Role of the Center for Urban Studies**

The University at Buffalo Center for Urban Studies (CENTER) is a research and community development institute located in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning, School of Architecture and Planning. Established in 1987, the mission of the CENTER is to work with municipalities, community based organizations, and neighborhoods to improve community and solve problems facing distressed areas of the region. Over the past 20 years, the CENTER has worked with numerous distressed communities throughout the Western New York region on a range of community economic, planning and community development issues.

The CENTER specializes in developing outreach programs to engage residents and stakeholders in the neighborhood planning and community development process. Its role in the Step 2 Nomination Study is to develop an aggressive public participation plan that will end in the involvement of a representative sample of residents and stakeholders in the process. Within this context, the CENTER functions as a liaison between the project team and the community and stakeholders and helps the project team negotiate the neighborhood political landscape, while simultaneously building trust between residents and stakeholders and the project team. Moreover, the CENTER functions as the community's advocate and works to ensure that their voice is heard in all deliberations and decisions.

## **1.3 Historical Overview**

The Highland Avenue is a predominantly African American, that forms a triangle, situated in the North end of the City of Niagara Falls. The community is bound by the Conrail tracks and the Deveaux neighborhood, an affluent predominantly white community, on the West, and Hyde Avenue to the East; by the intersection of Highland Avenue and Route 61 to the North, and Depot Avenue to the South.

The Highland Avenue black community emerged during the Second Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North. Between 1940 and 1970, lured by the jobs in the World War II defense industries and the post-war economic boom, millions of African Americans moved from the Southern to Midwestern, Northeastern, and Western cities, including St. Louis, Chicago, Detroit, Buffalo, New York City, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. World War 1 and the Immigration Act of 1924 effectively ended the flow of European immigrants to the emerging industrial centers in the Midwest and Northeast, causing a shortage of workers in the factories. Filled with dreams and hopes of a better life, black workers answered the call for factor workers north of the Mason-Dixon Line.

The residents of Highland Avenue were among the millions of blacks moving into the Midwest and Northeastern cities. Labor agents from local plants, such as Union Carbide, Carbon Corporation, Hooker Chemical and others enticed southern blacks to Niagara Falls. The influx of blacks into the city during the late 1930s and 1940s caused Highland to emerge as the center of Black Niagara Falls. The location of the city's industrial heartland in the North end combined with the building of the Hyde Park Village (1943) and Center Court Public Housing (1944) to spawn the emergence of the Highland Avenue black community. Hyde Park was meant to be temporary housing for African Americans and therefore it was not as attractive and well built as its counterpart, Center Court. By 1947, according to historian Michael Boston, about 61 percent of Black Niagara Falls lived in the Highland Avenue community. Throughout the sixties and seventies, the majority of black migrants to Niagara Falls settled in the Highland Avenue community.

The Highland Community was built to house the workers who were expected to seek employment in nearby factories. Thus, the residential areas were literally built around the industrial core and the Conrail tracks, which formed the eastern boundary, with industrial lands forming the core of the neighborhood. After the Highland population peaked in 1970, industrial disinvestment in Niagara Falls created declining employment, decreasing population, poverty, abandoned factories and blight.

## **2.0 The Community Outreach Strategy**

The community participation plan for the Highland Community was based on the establishment of an aggressive campaign to make residents aware of the BOA Step 2 Nomination Study and to notify them of every public open house. The CENTER developed multiple techniques to encourage the participation of residents. The fundamental goal was to ensure that each geographical corner of the community was represented, and that representation took place across gender and age dimensions. In this sense, success was measured primarily by the geographical distribution of participants and secondarily by gender and age representation. While youth were underrepresented at public events, in our outreach activities we were able to contact some community youth to get their viewpoints on ways that brownfield redevelopment could benefit the community.

Building trust between the community leaders and the BOA project team was the most critical component of the outreach strategy. Only with their support, would it be possible to involve other residents. Toward this end, James Pitts and Henry Taylor held numerous meetings with various leaders of the community to explain the project to them and to urge them to participate. In addition, every opportunity was used to engage ordinary citizens in conversations about the project and their community concerns.

## 2.1 Communication Tools

**2.1.1 Contact list.** A contact list was developed, maintained, and added to throughout the project. Sign-in sheets were circulated at each public meeting to obtain information on those in attendance. The contact list was used to notify the residents and stakeholders of all public open houses. To make sure that communications were highly focused, the *Contact List* was classified on the basis of a person's relationship to project and/or community.

- Steering Committee members
- Elected Officials
- Local Organizations
  - i. City Departments
  - ii. Economic Development Organizations
  - iii. Housing Agencies
  - iv. Community Centers
  - v. Education Institutions
  - vi. Faith-Based Groups
  - vii. Vacant Land Owners
  - viii. Local Businesses
    - 1. Manufacturing Companies
    - 2. Utility Companies
    - 3. Local Developers
    - 4. Media
- City – Owner of Record (most recent – from the city)
- Neighborhood Residents – attendees at each Open House
- Mini course Attendees

**2.1.2 Announcements for Public Open Houses [Getting the Word out].** A decentralized strategy was developed for the distribution of announcements of public open houses. Although only about 2,700 people live in the Highland community, the community has a complex residential structure. It is a low density community composed of four different residential clusters, including two clusters comprised of multi-family dwelling units and two clusters composed mainly of single family dwellings. This complexity made it necessary to create a decentralized approach to the distribution of flyers announcing meetings to the residents. After identifying each cluster, we created distribution priorities within each cluster and hired local residents to distribute the material.

To augment the decentralize approach, signs were strategically distributed throughout the Highland community to announce/promote Open House #3 – **“Directions for the Future”**, a visioning session held in October 2008. The goal of the meeting was to inform the public about the research and progress made by the project team to date and to hold small group discussions with residents to obtain their feedback

on the research and analysis. Other tools used to announce public open houses and to encourage residents to attend were:

**Phone Calls-** Follow up phone calls were made to residents and stakeholders participants to remind them about each weekly meeting.

**Local Organizations-** We collaborated with ministers, the Niagara Falls Housing Authority (NFHA), the Niagara Improvement Association, and the Highland Community Revitalization Committee to promote project awareness with their congregations, tenants, and organizational members. The use of these groups helped to “get the word out” to residents of the community and to increase awareness of the BOA study.

**Newspaper articles-** A series of articles have appeared in the Niagara Gazette, the local newspaper, to promote the project, the mini course, and each of the Open House’s/public meetings.

**Website-** A website was developed to place all project materials for residents to review – [www.shapehighlandsfuture.com](http://www.shapehighlandsfuture.com). The dates of public open houses were listed on the website. Residents of the Highland area can access the website from the own personal computer, or can access the site from the ATTAIN computer lab located in the Doris Jones Resource Center in the Highland Avenue neighborhood.

As previously mentioned, the Highland community has a complex residential structure. Therefore, we decided to measure successful community participation in terms of *representation* rather than number of attendees. In essence, a good meeting turnout was one in which each of the four residential clusters had representatives. To determine if those attending the various open houses were representative of the community, the City of Niagara Falls used GIS to geocode and map the residential location of those attending the various sessions.

Using this approach, flyers were distributed to promote the following events:

- Public Open House #1
- Each of the six sessions of the Brownfield Mini Course
- Public Open House #2
- Public Open House #3

## **2.2 Methods of Engagement**

The primary goal of this public participation plan is to elicit the idea of residents and stakeholders on ways to grow and develop their community. For that participation to be authentic, a common language and knowledge base must exist between neighborhood residents and stakeholders and the project team. Without such a knowledge base,

residents and stakeholders will be limited in their ability to participate in the planning process. Moreover, venues must be established that will enable the residents and stakeholders to drive the planning process. Against this backdrop, the following methods of engagement were employed. Sincerely

**2.2.0 Stakeholder Interviews.** Stakeholder interviews, which also included residents, were held at the onset of the project. The purpose was to collect data on the viewpoints of the residents at the beginning of the project, so that their thoughts would influence and guide the thinking of the project team's program planning. Toward this end, the Center for Urban Studies (CENTER), along with the rest of the project team, conducted stakeholder interviews with various member of the Niagara Falls community on January 22-23, 2008. Over the course of these two days, the project team interviewed twenty-eight (28) people were interviewed. Their thoughts on the current state of the Highland community, ideas for the future development of the neighborhood, and other key messages that could assist the revitalization of the BOA target area provided the backdrop against which work on the Step 2 Nomination Study unfolded.

The breakdown of individuals who were interviewed was as follows:

- Eight (8) individuals who are civic leaders (Fire Chief, Police Chief, EZ/MBE Coordinator, County Legislator, etc...)
- Four (4) owners of local businesses
- Three (3) ministers from the local Faith Based community
- Three (3) individuals involved in Economic Development in Niagara Falls
- Three (3) residents of the City of Niagara Falls
- Two (2) residents of the Highland Avenue community
- Two (2) individual who work for a company that owns industrial land in Highland
- Two (2) individuals who volunteer in the local community
- One (1) representative of Niagara University who works with their Community Outreach Partnership Center Program

A final report of the stakeholder interviews has been completed and submitted to the City of Niagara Falls.

**2.2.1 The Brownfield Mini Course.** The Center for Urban Studies conducted a six (6) week mini course on Brownfields and Brownfield Redevelopment between Open House #1 and #2. The goal of the introductory course on Brownfields was to create a common knowledge base and language between city officials, the consultant team for the Step 2 Nomination Study, and residents of the Highland Avenue Community. The purpose of the curriculum was to educate and prepare residents who attended the course to participate at a higher level in the community visioning and planning sessions.



### ***The Program***

The mini course was held from May 6 through June 10, 2008. The classes provided introductory materials and presenters around Brownfields. All of the sessions were held in the Attain Computer Laboratory at the Doris Jones Family Resource Building in the Highland Community. The sessions ran from 6:00 to 8:00 PM on Tuesday evenings, and the program was coordinated by Mary Fisher of Environmental Education Associates.

### ***The Target Population***

Unlike many Brownfield educational programs, the mini course was targeted for residents, stakeholders, and community leaders. We anticipated that there might be different levels of knowledge about Brownfield development among the attendees, but decided not to make any special efforts to compensate for these differentials. However, Professor Taylor and Mr. Pitts routinely asked the presenters questions designed to clarify and/or provide examples of issues that some attendees might have difficulty understanding.

In determining the target population, our primary consideration was to have a small but highly representative group to attend the mini course regularly. The Highland Community consists of three main residential clusters with differing conditions in each area. Representation from each cluster would help ensure that most sections of the community were participating.

### ***Weekly Topics***

- Week One: Introduction to Brownfields
- Week Two: Step One and Step Two Nomination Studies
- Week Three: Employment Opportunities and Brownfield Reclamation
- Week Four: Redevelopment Options
- Week Five: Providing Feed-back at Public Open Houses
- Week Six: Bus Tour of Brownfields on the Niagara Frontier

### ***Public Open Houses***

Three (3) Public Open Houses have been held through November 2008. Each public open house presented specific information on the BOA project and solicited ideas, feedback, and priorities from the public on the direction of the project. The public open houses created an opportunity for the residents and stakeholders to provide critical input on every phase of the work. This not only kept them engaged in the project, but also provided a feedback to ensure that the project team “heard” the residents and incorporated their views into the work that was being done.

- **Public Open House #1 – Information Session (April 1, 2008)**

This session introduced the community to the project team and local and state officials. The meeting provided an overview of the objectives of the Highland Avenue Step 2 Nomination Study, and the New York State BOA program. There were fifty-two (52) people in attendance that night (30 male, 22 female), most of them from the Highland community and the immediate area, some of them former Highland community residents with a strong connection to their former neighborhood, as well as residents from the rest of the city who were interested in the project. A distribution map produced by the City of Niagara Falls – Office of Planning/Environmental Services, based on the evening's sign-in sheet, supports this information.



Public Open House #1

- **Public Open House #2 – Setting the Stage (June 19, 2008)**

The goal of this Open House was to set the stage and flesh out the goals and objectives of Brownfield redevelopment in the Highland Avenue. In addition, the meeting began to look at the relationship between the regeneration of the community and Brownfield redevelopment. Thirty-five (35) people attended this meeting (17 male, 18 female). Many of the people who were at the first Open House, and those who participated in the Brownfield mini course were in attendance at this meeting.

- **Public Open House #3 – Directions for the Future (October 23, 2008)**

The third Open House consisted of two (2) parts. The first part of the meeting was a presentation by each member of the consultant team on their specific area of expertise they are bringing to the project, including the area's market potential, community priorities and recommendations, BOA reuse and development, and interim and future land use. During the second part of the meeting - a visioning session, attendee's were broken up into small groups to ensure that the ideas of the residents of the community are aligned with local opportunities and constraints. There were forty-eight (48) individuals at this meeting (28 males, 19 females). Similar to the second Open House, many of those who attended were people who have participated throughout the process.

### **Website**

A website was developed to place all project materials for residents to review – [www.shapehighlandsfuture.com](http://www.shapehighlandsfuture.com) Residents of the Highland area can access the website from the own personal computer, or can access the site from the ATTAIN computer lab located in the Doris Jones Family Resource Building in the Highland Avenue community.



BOA Project – Website Homepage

### **Document Repository (Hard Copy)**

A hard copy document repository was established at the Doris Jones Family Resource Building for those residents interested in learning about the progress of the project, but may not be familiar with using a computer. Information on project activity and events, as well as information on the BOA process and hand outs from meetings/public events are kept here.

### **3.0 Issues & Priorities from the Community**

The residents wanted a *place-based* approach to economic and neighborhood development, to drive BOA Step 2 Nomination Study. Brownfield remediation, to be beneficial to the community, had to create employment and holistic neighborhood development in an environmental setting free from pollution and environmental degradation. This was the guiding principle that shaped the issues and priorities from the community.

For years, the residents of Highland have sought to eliminate the brownfields in their community and turn it into a great *place* to live, work, play and raise a family. In years past, the Highland had only marginally benefitted from the presence of businesses and industries in their community. They wanted the BOA project to change this history.

Within this framework, three major issues drove the concerns of residents:

**Employment**—the Highland Community has a very high rate of unemployment, and the resident's believed that brownfield regeneration needed to produce good jobs for the people who lived in the community. Unless this happened, the project was a failure, no matter how many businesses or industries located in the community.

**Neighborhood Development**—the residents viewed neighborhood development in terms of *place-based* development (1) the regeneration of the Highland Avenue commercial corridor (2) extensive landscaping and streetscaping, along with the creation of more open space, bike paths, parks and recreational space for youth, and (3) have a holistic concept of neighborhood development. That is, they wanted the regeneration of brownfields to drive the community development process by stimulating the redevelopment of the Highland Avenue commercial corridor, extensive landscaping and streetscaping, open spaces, bike paths, and new and renovated housing.

**Environmental protection**—the residents were insistent that polluting industries should be kept out of Highland and favored green development. Even so, they still had environmental concerns. Against this backdrop, an analysis of the outcomes from the stakeholder interviews, the Mini Course, the public open houses #1, 2, 3 and informal discussions, the major issues concerning the community were identified.

Lastly, the residents and stakeholders repeatedly stated that the project team “must listen to our concerns.” Years of betrayal have made them deeply sensitive about approaches based on “you plan and we participate.” That is, the residents and stakeholders did not want this project to become one of those initiatives in which the expert plan and the residents simply respond to their work. Highland residents and stakeholders wanted to be the engine that drives the BOA.

### **3.1 Community Issues**

Against this backdrop outlined above, the issues concerning the community can be classified in the following manner:

#### **Employment**

- Create jobs
- Connect neighborhood-based job training programs to respond to emerging and future opportunities
- Attract clean industries and develop green jobs.
- Take advantage of new jobs at the reopening of Globe Plant and the new Santarosa tire recycling business.

#### **Place-Based Neighborhood Development**

##### *Community Economic Development*

- Work to attract new commercial uses and community orientated services along Highland Avenue. Turn the corridor into a regional shopping complex.
- Capitalize on the heritage of the area and create cultural tourism opportunities and a more positive identity for Highland.
- Link local community and economic development activities to city and regional activities.
- Explore opportunities to create a Highland Based Economic Development Corporation to manage the community’s participation in the revitalization strategies.
- Use partnerships with other institutions such as Niagara University and NYPA to participate in the redevelopment of the area.

- Develop job training institutions to ensure that residents will be prepared for the new jobs and opportunities.
- Make resources available for assisting minority businesses so that they can take advantage of the new opportunities.

#### Housing and Recreation of the Neighborhood Setting

- Continue to improve and build new housing for all types of residents.
- Develop more parks, bike paths, recreational space and re-landscape existing green space.
- Develop public art as a means of beautifying the neighborhood
- Some streets and institutions need to be renamed as a way of re-imagining the community and generating greater pride among residents.

#### Environmental Issues

- Conduct community health assessments.
- Focus upon green development
- Establish community environmental standards

### **3.2 Priorities from the Community**

From these principles and general set of issues, there emerged five priorities, which were used to frame the community's directions for the plan.

- The residents want to play a pivotal role in the Highland BOA planning process and in the future development of the community. There are two critical dimensions to this priority. At one level, the residents wanted to drive the project. This means that the final product should be reflective of their interest and should be anchored by their issues. Over and over, we heard that economic development is not an end within itself. The purpose of economic development is to drive community development through the creation of jobs and opportunities to develop and strengthen the neighborhood. The second dimension relates to the importance of structures being created that ensure the residents will control the future development of their community. Only this way, the residents felt, they could be ensured that the implementation and development process would continue to reflect the *original intent* of the BOA plan.
- Facilitate access to jobs, education and training for the residents. From the community's perspective, the only successful brownfield



remediation project is one that provides jobs and opportunities for business development among residents and African American entrepreneurs. On this point, the residents were talking about jobs at all stages of the process, including remediation.

- *Any redevelopment plan must be place-based and locally relevant to the conditions facing the Highland Community.* The goal should be a holistic plan that link economic development to community development. The primary goal is to develop the Highland Community as a *special place*. Every vehicle that is capable of capturing economic activities and driving it toward community development should be explored. In particular, the residents wanted to ensure that the appropriate institutions needed to make these outcomes happen in the real world, were included in the BOA planning report.
- *The redevelopment of the Highland Avenue commercial corridor is crucial to the regeneration of the community.* The Highland Avenue commercial corridor should become a shopping hub for the entire North End community. Moreover, it should be developed so that it can provide goods and services for the hundreds of new workers coming into the area. Unless Highland Avenue is developed in this manner, it will not be capable of capturing the market created by the economic regeneration of the neighborhood. This means that the BOA planning process should outline strategies that best positions Highland Avenue to play this new economic role in the North End.
- *Transform brownfields to positively improve the perception of Highland and improve the quality of life for its residents.* The regeneration of brownfields needs to be landscaped in such a way that they enhance the beauty and visual image of the community. Moreover, in thinking about various redevelopment strategies, the goal should not only be to provide the community with jobs and opportunities, but also to enhance the resident's quality of life.



Community Meeting

#### 4.0 Community Directions for the Plan

Against this backdrop of information, a template of the Community Directions for the Plan, which consisted of six components, was established that sought to meet the needs of neighborhood, the city, and region. The community believed that these directions should provide a scaffold for the BOA planning process.

1. Set a Plan in Place that is Responsive and Relevant: Prepare a Place-based Redevelopment Strategy. This component is composed of four interrelated parts.
  - Develop projects and programs that have clear neighborhood level impacts.
  - Target public and private investments to benefit and improve the quality of life within the community.
  - Link community development to city and regional activities.
  - Recognize the dual nature of economic development to serve the needs of the people in the immediate community along with city and regional business interests.



2. Clean up and Redevelop Brownfields: Develop a Plan to Improve the Design, Image and Attractiveness of the Community. The secret to re-imaging the Highland community and attracting businesses, industries, shoppers, and new residents is to make it a visually attractive community.

- Physically redesign the industrial area development patterns to be more compatible with residential areas.
- Make improvements in neighborhood infrastructure, sidewalks, buildings and public spaces.
- Change street networks to increase the accessibility of the area. In particular, access between Highland and other residential areas in the North End must be improved, especially connections to Niagara University and downtown Niagara Falls, on the one hand, and between DeVeaux and the Main Street area on the other hand.
- Re-landscape existing green areas.



Brownfield in the Highland Avenue Area

3. Build Economic Base and Create Local Opportunities: Develop Clean Industry Hub Based upon Emerging Strengths of the Highland Area. Highland has an opportunity to be in the

forefront of a market niche anchored by clean industries embedded in the green industries revolution.

- The reopening of the Globe Metallurgical Plant provides an opportunity to develop more businesses and jobs around solar manufacturing.
- Solar photovoltaic's (including modules, system components, and installation) will grow from a \$20.3 billion industry in 2007 to \$74 billion by 2017.
- The Community needs green and sustainable development guidelines for business development.



Globe Metallurgical

4. *Build Skills: Use Attain Center for Jobs and Workforce Development.* Historically, residents in neighborhoods like Highland have not taken full advantage of jobs in and near their communities because they lacked the appropriate skills. To solve this problem, it is necessary to establish a job training and workforce development component to the redevelopment process. The Access Center in the Doris Jones Family Resource

Building could be the hub of such an operation. Minimally, such an approach would consist of the following elements:

- All purpose resource center for project, community, and economic development information.
- Community access to computers.
- Access to project website.
- Site for project education programs.
- Link to brownfields and green Jobs training and placement.
- Collaborate with other city and regional workforce programs.

5. Forge Positive Identify and Capture Tourism Market: Build on Heritage of the Area to Create a Unique Attraction for Niagara Falls. Research has shown that the African American tourist market is huge and that many cities also benefit from having unique secondary tourist attractions, which will keep visitors to prolong their stay in the region.

- The Main Street and Whirlpool Bridge areas were used for “Underground Railroad.” The City has proposed to establish the area as a National Cultural District.
- A local cultural district can become a new attraction and generate revenues to support the revitalization of Highland.
- The possibility of Highland being turned into a tourist destination as a model World War 11 Black Industrial community.

## **5.0 An Emerging Community Vision**

At the third Public Open House, an emerging community vision took shape. This vision was rooted in an understanding of the regional and local context, the community’s land-use structure, environmental setting, and the market conditions of the western New York region. The vision statement produced at the meeting appears to have captured the issues and priorities of the residents, as well as emerging principles developed by the project team. The

vision of the community is to *“Transform Highland into a vibrant and attractive community with a strong economy and a high quality of life.”* Indeed, the vision statement functions as an interpretive framework to understand the seven principles that were discussed at Public Open House #3:

- Build a healthy Highland Community from the ground up – fully understand environmental, economic and social issues affecting the community.
- Reinvigorate Highland as a place where people can work, shop, play, learn and live seven days a week (implicit in this principle is the importance of transforming Highland Avenue into a vibrant commercial corridor and shopping hub of the North End).
- Transform negative perceptions of the area and generate a positive image for Highland through targeted place making efforts.
- Diversify and expand Highland’s economic base, while supporting existing viable businesses and industries to create new opportunities for businesses of all scales.
- Strengthen and diversify the skill sets of residents and workers to enable them to get jobs and access new opportunities.
- Keep community involvement in the forefront and develop institutions that will enable residents to drive future community growth and development.
- Success cannot occur in isolation: Highland is part of a wider city – the entire community must work together with the City to capture mutually beneficial opportunities at the local and regional level.

## **6.0 Helping to Make it Happen: Early Opportunities**

### **6.1 Training Opportunities and New Jobs**

- The Niagara Falls Housing Authority’s has formed a partnership with Mount St. Mary’s Hospital to construct a new neighborhood health center adjacent to the Doris Jones Family Resources Building on Ninth Street.
- Alternatives Resources Management Inc., a \$9 million investment to renovate 13 acres of land on the old Union Carbide Co. as part of an expansion of the Santarosa rubber recycling business. The

project is expected to create between 35 and 75 jobs during its first phase.

- Globe Metallurgical's re-opening of the Highland Avenue silicon production facility that was shuttered in 2003. This \$20 million investment is expected to produce around 100 jobs in 2009, and a related solar assemblage company on site, is projected to employ more than 500 by 2010.
- The designation of Main Street as a National Heritage Area this year, around the Underground Railroad along with Kevin Cottrell's Customs House for Niagara Falls.

#### NYSDEC Technical Assistance Grants

- The New York State DEC has approved the funding for a Technical Assistance Grant (TAG) of \$50,000 through the Niagara Falls Housing Authority to support community participation in the clean up of the TRACT II Brownfield site. The funding will support more educational resources, technical assistance, information and expanded community involvement during the clean up of the site.
- A second TAG Grant will be submitted by the NFHA for the remedial action to take place around the 1501 College Street site and the development of the Santarosa rubber recycling business.

#### Brownfield Job Training Initiative

- An application is being developed in partnership with the Niagara Falls Housing Authority to seek funding from the Environmental Protection Agency's Brownfield's Job Training Initiative. Grants up to \$200,000 are available for non-profit organizations. The grants fund programs designed to teach environmental assessment and cleanup job skills to residents living in low-income areas near brownfields sites. A Brownfield Initiative grant for the Highland Community would work in partnership with the Attain Lab Workforce Development program located at the Doris Jones Family Resource Building.

#### Community Benefit Agreement (CBA)

- One tool that can assure community involvement in the economic development and revitalization of the Highland Community would involve the establishment of Community Benefit Agreements (CBA's) in the BOA project area. CBA's are agreements between developers and coalitions of community organizations, through

which a broad range of community needs can be addressed, and help to ensure that affected residents share in the benefits of major developments. The Highland Avenue BOA project area has the potential to become a major employer once again in the Buffalo-Niagara region, and Highland residents should gain from its rebirth. CBA's allow community groups to have a voice in shaping projects, to press for community benefits that meet their particular needs, and to enforce developer's promises. The use of CBA's in Highland Avenue Community will help connect the redevelopment opportunities in the area directly to the residents who reside in the neighborhood.<sup>1</sup>

## **6.2 New Housing and Housing Renewal Opportunities**

- The Center Court HOPE VI Housing funding the Niagara Falls Housing Authority (NFHA) was awarded in 2006. The \$20 million grant from the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development is the largest housing development in decades in the City of Niagara Falls. The plan will replace the NFHA's Center Court public housing complex with 282 new housing units — including duplexes and townhouses — is currently being constructed in the Highland Community. The total project will be built in several phases and is expected to generate about \$72 million in economic activity. Thirty percent (30%) of the jobs created are expected to go to the residents of the NFHA and Highland Community.
- The newly constructed Cornerstone Village on Ninth Street opened in 2008. Cornerstone Village owned by Norstar Development, replaced the former 198 dilapidated and abandoned housing units of Unity Park II, with 40 privately owned low-income townhouses representing a \$10 million reinvestment in the community. Two additional phases are planned for Cornerstone on existing vacant parcels along Ninth Street over the next 5 years creating more quality housing and employment opportunities for the Highland Community.
- Norstar Development is planning the replacement of the 204 substandard housing units at Applewalk Houses. Applewalk Houses, the former Unity Park I is located on Ninth Street will not be eligible for redevelopment until the low income housing tax credits compliance ends in several years.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.goodjobsfirst.org/pdf/cba2005final.pdf>

- City of Niagara Falls Housing Programs

The City of Niagara Falls offers several residential housing programs through its Community Development Department that offer Highland Avenue area residents, as well as potential residents, access to resources to purchase and/or rehabilitate properties in the neighborhood. These programs are funded through the City of Niagara Falls – Community Development Block Grant (CDBG).

According to a City of Niagara Falls 2008 Housing Rehabilitation Target Area map (see below), the Highland Avenue community can access existing housing programs through the Highland Community Revitalization Committee (HCRC).

The City states on its website that the intent of the CDBG is to create viable communities by providing decent, affordable housing and by expanding economic opportunities for low- and moderate income persons. The city receives approximately \$3 million per year which is used for projects such as housing rehabilitation, economic development, public services, infrastructure improvements, public facilities, code enforcement, and clearance of blighted structures.

CDBG funds must be used to meet one of three national objectives:

1. Benefit low- and moderate income persons
2. Prevention or elimination of slums or blighted areas
3. Other urgent needs

The City uses the HOME program to fund projects that will provide decent, safe, and affordable housing opportunities to low- and moderate income households. The City reports that its annual entitlement for this program is \$600,000.00. Individuals who are interested in accessing City of Niagara Falls programs to purchase and/or rehabilitate a property in the Highland community should contact HCRC.

In addition to the owner-occupied housing programs, the Department of Community Development also offers a rental property rehabilitation program for land owners/investors in the City's Community Development target areas. Often in distressed inner-city neighborhoods, investments made by owner-occupants are mitigated by run down rental properties whose owners refuse to make necessary improvements to a property as long as the tenant(s) pay the rent each month. As one of the City's target areas, this program offers an opportunity for Highland Avenue community land owners/investors to make improvements to their rental property up to \$50,000.00, with half of the funding being provided

as a deferred grant, as long as the land owner/investor does not sell the property within five (5) years of the work being completed. There is additional funding to address lead paint based issues at the property.<sup>2</sup>

- Other Potential Housing Programs

Employee Assisted Housing (EAH)

The basic thought behind the idea of creating employee assisted housing (EAH) program(s) in the Highland Avenue neighborhood is to connect the residential development of the neighborhood to business development that may occur on the sites cleaned up within the BOA project area.

Employer-assisted housing refers to any housing program—rental or homeownership—that is financed or in some way assisted by an employer. In light of the investments made by Globe Metallurgical and Santarosa in the BOA project area, an EAH program in Highland could spur residential and neighborhood development by connecting current residents of the area to jobs created in the BOA area and also by connecting employees of companies such as Globe Metallurgical and Santarosa to homeownership opportunities in the Highland Avenue area.

EAH is a flexible tool that can be tailored to work in different community contexts and to support various equitable development goals. Most EAH programs help employees purchase homes—often near their workplace. They can also provide rental assistance or increase the amount of housing in the surrounding community that is affordable for an employer's workers.

EAH is a "double bottom line" strategy: It helps working families secure affordable housing near their workplaces—oftentimes helping them purchase their first home (a step toward building equity and financial assets)—while helping employers find and keep qualified workers, improve community relations, and revitalize neighborhoods. EAH is an especially powerful tool for employers that are struggling with recruitment and retention. At the same time, it leverages an employer benefit to generate neighborhood revitalization and help meet the housing needs of low- and moderate-income working families.

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<sup>2</sup> [www.niagarafallsusa.org](http://www.niagarafallsusa.org)



EAH programs are generally oriented toward households with incomes between 80 and 120 percent of the area median. Including options such as rental assistance, homeownership education, credit repair and counseling, and the extension of benefits to non-employee residents can strengthen the ability of an EAH program to serve lower-income residents as well.<sup>3</sup>

#### Code Enforcement Programs

Housing codes are generally perceived as a legal tool to make sure that properties are safe and promote healthy living for its inhabitants. Housing code enforcement applies to both owner-occupied, as well as renter-occupied housing. These codes usually set forth minimum standards that must be met in order for the property to be considered habitable. However, the enforcement of housing codes can also serve another purpose for the municipality, which is preserving the existing housing stock to maintain healthy neighborhoods that protect the values of surrounding properties. In addition, when effectively administered, housing codes can help prevent the spread of blight in neighborhoods. Many municipalities use the enforcement of housing codes as a strategy for revitalization. A search of the web will find many local examples of the use of housing codes to preserve neighborhoods.

#### Bank Consortium

Another potential tool that could assist in creating homeownership and rehabilitation opportunities in the Highland Avenue neighborhood would be to work with local banks, in conjunction with the City of Niagara Falls or the Highland Community Revitalization Committee to leverage city housing program funds with those provided by a bank consortium. The program could be set up where Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) credits are provided to participating banks that lend in the target area.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.policylink.org/EDTK/EAH/policy.html>

## 7.0 Key Messages and Conclusions

### 7.1 Key Messages

Throughout this process, four key messages emerged from the community:

- The residents must drive the BOA planning process, and institutions must be eventually set up that place them in a position to control implementation and the future development of the community.
- Place-based development is the strategic framework within which economic and neighborhood development must occur. This is the key to reinvigorating Highland as a community where people can work, shop, play, learn and live seven days a week.
- Jobs and opportunities are the key to making the BOA benefit the residents. This is the bottom line.
- The Highland community is not an island. Rather, it is an integral part of the city, county, and the western New York Region, which includes Southern Ontario. Consequently, both its economic and neighborhood development plans must be designed to create a synergy between local and city and regional development.

### 7.2 Conclusions

- The viewpoints contained in this segment of the report are a reflection of a representative sample of the Highland community. Throughout this process, the project team carefully monitored the distribution of those attending the public open houses and the Brownfield Mini-Course. The goal was to determine the extent to which the different sections of the community were represented at the various meetings. The data show that every segment of the community was represented for all public events. Thus, the community input in this phase of the BOA is representative of the Highland Community.
- The community vision is one that unites the different segments of the community. The Center for Urban Studies has met every leadership group in Highland, and they have all expressed support for the project and they have all had representatives at the various meetings. Thus, the emerging community vision has the potential to unite the Highland community around a singular approach to the redevelopment of their community.
- The high level of community engagement throughout the Highland BOA Step 2 process can be attributed to the aggressive implementation of the Center's

community participation plan. Coupled with the forging of strong community based partnerships with organizations such as the Niagara Falls Housing Authority and the Highland Community Revitalization Committee, the foundation has been laid for strong community support for the next phases of the BOA Study process. The Highland Community Participation plan may also serve as a successful planning model for other BOA projects.

#### **Establish a Highland Community based Economic Development Corporation**

- This new public/private development corporation could be tasked with leading the redevelopment of the Highland industrial area.
- The agency could be created by the Empire State Development Corp in partnership with the City and County.

#### **Develop a Highland Avenue Commercial Revitalization Plan**

- Highland Avenue is viewed as the traditional commercial corridor for the community.
- The revitalization of Highland Avenue will bring life back to the street and make it a central hub and connector from Main Street to the North End.
- A revitalized Highland Avenue will make the community more attractive to prospective business and industry and capture a portion of the enlarged market that comes from economic development.

#### ***Future Activity – The Technical Assistance Grant***

The Technical Assistance Grant (TAG) is a program funded through the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) TAGs are a citizen participation tool available to eligible community groups to increase public awareness and understanding of remedial activities taking place in their community. Eligible community groups may apply to receive grants for up to \$50,000 per eligible site. There is no matching contribution required on the part of the grant recipient. TAGs, in the form of State Assistance Contracts (SACs), are available to eligible community groups for the purpose of obtaining independent technical assistance in interpreting existing environmental information about an eligible "significant threat" site being remediated in the State Superfund Program or Brownfield Cleanup Program.

Given the importance of the Tract 11 and the 1501 College Avenue sites to the BOA project, the project team believed that the TAG grants would make it possible to deepen the residents understanding of brownfield issues in their community and enable the team to intensify its engagement with the community.

There are two (2) TAG eligible sites with the Highland Avenue BOA area: (1) the Tract II site, and (2) the 1501 College Avenue site. The DEC began initial remediation activity at the Tract II site in November 2008 and expects work to continue through 2010. Therefore TAG funds are available for the site. The Center for Urban Studies has been working with the Niagara Falls Housing Authority (NFHA) to submit an application for a TAG for the Tract II site. The application was submitted in November 2008, and after revising the application for the DEC, a decision on eligibility is expected sometime in January 2009.

The NFHA was identified as an ideal applicant because in the Highland Community, it is the primary agency addressing the community's needs. The NFHA provides affordable public housing in the neighborhood at the Harry S. Jordan Gardens community, located at 2910 Highland Avenue, and the Center Court community, located at 1700 Center Avenue. Combined, these apartment complexes have 234 family units and are both within walking distance of the TRACT II site.

The purpose of the Highland Technical Assistance Grant is to provide critical information and support the community's involvement around the remediation and potential reuse of the TRACT II site. Residents and a variety of community stakeholders must be included throughout the remediation and planning process. Building effective community involvement means having complete access to information about the extent of the contamination; potential health risks, clean-up methods, and potential reuse options. Effective community based participation will also ensure that informative recommendations for the brownfield's clean up, potential land-use, economic development, and environmental protection meet community expectations.

The HITAG will provide needed resources to ensure that residents and stakeholders in the Highland community are fully informed about the remediation activity at the TRACT II site. Community participation increases the understanding of potential health concerns, and ensures substantial involvement in decisions around the brownfield remediation and potential redevelopment at the site. Soliciting resident's input and ideas for the remediation of the TRACT II site provides greater opportunities to also complement the existing community redevelopment goals of both the Highland residents and city.

### ***Health Impact***

The NFHA has provided leadership in bringing many services to the Highland Community and has a vested interest in the remediation and redevelopment of the TRACT II site. The location of Tract II sits between the Harry S. Jordans and Center Court communities, and residential areas in the Highland Area. As part of their daily activities families from these complexes and surrounding residential areas are at risk to exposure to the contamination at the site. **The youth in the Highland Area are especially at risk, as young children from the ages of 5 to 14 years represent 38% of the Highland population. In addition, the median age for the community is 25 years old.**<sup>4</sup> The 20 acres of the Tract II site dominates the residential areas. The property has been abandoned since 1992, without any barriers to entry. The site is hazardous with the remains of an underground parking facility on the site. There has been illegal dumping at the

site for many years. The current character of Tract II is overgrown vegetation with debris and the presence of a variety of wild animals that include raccoons, rats and dogs. The large debris strewn throughout the site is a cruel reminder of the bygone glory days of the past industrial era and the present dangers of the existing conditions. Tract II has a profound blighting influence upon the overall quality of life in the Highland Area, contributing to its poor community image. Healthy community activities that include outdoor recreational space, more parks and green areas have been restricted for fear of known and unknown contaminated properties. Collective community activities involving beautification, re-landscaping and the creation of urban gardens could improve the image of the community. However, residents are reluctant to engage in these efforts because they are convinced of the widespread environmental contamination at, or near, their homes.

The expansion of more quality community services has also been hampered because of undevelopable land. The community's level of exposure over the years to the health risks of the contaminated properties throughout the Highland Area is largely unknown and needs to be assessed as part of the existing remediation process at the site.

### ***Economic Impact***

The environmental conditions of the TRACT II and other brownfield sites in the Highland area negatively impact its economic prosperity, in addition to the health and safety of residents. There has been a dramatic loss of jobs and businesses, as well as a steady decline in the housing market, where property values have fallen and the lack of reinvestment in the neighborhoods has resulted in the increase of vacant and dilapidated properties. The local commercial retail businesses, especially along Highland Ave. have closed. The socioeconomic problems of poverty and crime have increased. **The median household income in the area is \$13,189, which is approximately 50% of the city's median household income. According to the 2000 Census, the poverty rate for census tract 202, which encompasses all of the Highland area, was 51.4%, which is significantly higher than the poverty rate for the City of Niagara Falls, which was 19.4%.<sup>5</sup>**

Public and emergency services have diminished with the closing of police and fire stations in the area. Public infrastructure has not been adequately maintained, and there is generally a lack of confidence in the area's economic viability. In the past, many of the residents of the neighborhood worked in the industries located in the Highland area. Since these industries left, so have job opportunities. In addition, supporting businesses such as shops, restaurants, etc. have closed as well, further limiting employment opportunities for neighborhood residents and youth.

### ***Steps***

The TAG Coordinator has indicated that the approval letter for the HITAG will be received by the NFHA in January 2009, along with the State Assistance Contract. The NFHA will then release a Request for Proposal (RFP) for assistance in implementing the public outreach and education

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<sup>5</sup> 2000 United States Census

campaign on conditions at the Tract II site. The Center for Urban Studies will submit a proposal to the NFHA to continue the public outreach work it has begun through the Step 2 Nomination study through the TAG.

# **APPENDIX**

## BROWNFIELD MINI-COURSE BROCHURE

# Sign Up!

☒ **Yes, I want to learn more about Highland Community's Brownfields through the six week BOA Mini-Course.**

**Please check the sessions you are interested in:**

☐ I am intrested in all sessions

☐ **Week 1 - May 6th:** Introduction to Brownfields

☐ **Week 2 - May 13th:** Step One and Step Two Nomination Studies

☐ **Week 3 - May 20th:** Employment Opportunities and Brownfield Reclamation

☐ **Week 4 - May 27th:** Redevelopment Options

☐ **Week 5 - June 3rd:** Provide Feed-back at Public Open Houses

☐ **Week 6 - June 10th:** Bus Tour of Brownfield on the Niagara Frontier

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Adress: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

This brochure was prepared for the City of Niagara Falls, the Highland Community Revitalization Committee, Inc., the New York State DOS and the New York State DEC with State funds provided through the Brownfield Opportunity Area Program, with additional funds provided by USEPA. Below is a list of Institutions, organizations and consultants involved developing the Highland neighborhood.

City of Niagara Falls	Urban Strategies Inc.
New York State DOS	Center for Urban Studies, University at Buffalo
New York State DEC	TVGA Consultants
HCRC	Economics Research Associates
NMHA	SUNI Attain Lab

Send the form to:

**Center for Urban Studies,  
333 Hayes Hall Bldg 1,  
3435 Main Street,  
Buffalo, NY 14214 - 3087**

\* Mark the envelope "Highland Mini-Course"

or Contact Dr. Henry Taylor  
t: (716) 829-2714  
e: htaylor@buffalo.edu

The Mini-Courses will be held in the SUNY Attain Lab at the Doris Jones Center, 3001 9th Street, Niagara Falls, NY, 14305

For more detailed information visit:  
**ShapeHighlandsFuture.com**

## SHAPE HIGHLANDS FUTURE!



Sign Up for the 6 Week BOA\*

# Mini-Course

One key to reach success in this project is that the community come together and learn more about Brownfields.

Residents, officials and consultants meet to form a common understanding of possibilities for redevelopment in the Highland Avenue community.

\*BOA stands for "Brownfield Opportunity Areas". Please visit ShapeHighlandsFuture.com for more information on the subject.



# Get involved and learn

Now you have an opportunity to learn more about the Brownfields around you. The BOA Step 2 Nomination Study offer residents a chance to participate in a six week BOA mini-course. After completing the course each participant will receive a "BOA Community Expert Certificate".

**Together we can create a common understanding around the Brownfields...**

The goal of the introductory course on Brownfields is to create a common knowledge base and language between city officials, consultants for the Step 2 Nomination Study and the residents of the Highland Avenue community.

**...and develop insight on possibilities for redevelopment of the Highland community**

A secondary goal of the course is to provide residents with a deeper understanding of possibilities for brownfield redevelopment in the Highland Avenue community and for developing insights into the ways that brownfield redevelopment can be linked to Highland's broader community development plan.

## Six Week Mini-Course in your Community

**Become a advocate for the Highland Community**

### **Week 1 - May 6: Introduction to Brownfields**

This opening session will focus on three topics. The first will be a definition of brownfields, and the second will focus on the brownfield challenge(s) in the Highland community. The third topic will discuss planning and visioning for brownfield reuse within a neighborhood revitalization strategy.

### **Week 2 - May 13: Step One and Step Two Nomination Studies**

This session will provide a discussion of both Step One and Step Two Nomination Studies, with the great emphasis placed on the purpose and activities involved in a Step Two Nomination Study.

### **Week 3 - May 20: Employment Opportunities and Brownfield Reclamation**

This session will explore two interrelated themes. The opening session will examine the technical aspects of brownfield remediation and discuss the role of the federal and state governments in brownfield reclamation. This discussion will also include issues such as land acquisition and the various levels of contamination. The second session will discuss the different types of employment opportunities that can occur at various phases of a reclamation project and discuss the role of Step Two studies in anticipating employment opportunities.

### **Week 4 - May 27: Redevelopment Options**

This assistance will provide detailed information about brownfields reuse options that are outside the traditional economic uses that have dominated early brownfields redevelopment.

### **Week 5 - June 3: Provide Feed-back at Public Open Houses**

This session will examine the types of reporting that occurs at the various public open houses and helps participants think through ways to critique reports, reflect on projects goals and objectives, and how to provide useful feedback. The duties and responsibilities of the steering committee will also be discussed.

### **Week 6 - June 10: Bus Tour of Brownfields on the Niagara Frontier**

The bus tour will focus on brownfield sites in the Buffalo Avenue area, Love Canal, and developments in Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada and St. Catharines, along with the Highland Avenue area.

For more information visit:

**ShapeHighlandsFuture.com**

## BROWNFIELD MINI-COURSE – WEEK 1 FLYER (FLYERS WERE DISTRIBUTED EACH WEEK)

### SHAPE HIGHLANDS FUTURE!

# Attend the 6 week **BOA\* Mini-Course**

One key to reach success in this project is that the community come together and learn more about Brownfields. Residents, officials and consultants meet to form a common understanding of possibilities for redevelopment in the Highland Avenue community.

The Mini-Courses will be held in the SUNY Attain Lab at the Doris Jones Center, 3001 9th Street, Niagara Falls, NY, 14305

For more detailed information visit:

[www.shapehighlandsfuture.com](http://www.shapehighlandsfuture.com)

\*BOA stands for "Brownfield Opportunity Areas". Please visit [ShapeHighlandsFuture.com](http://ShapeHighlandsFuture.com) for more information on the subject.

Now you have an opportunity to learn more about the Brownfields around you. The BOA Step 2 Nomination Study offer residents a chance to participate in a six week BOA mini-course. After completing the course each participant will receive a "BOA Community Expert Certificate".

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#### ...and develop insight on possibilities for redevelopment of the Highland community

A secondary goal of the course is to provide residents with a deeper understanding of possibilities for brownfield redevelopment in the Highland Avenue community and for developing insights into the ways that brownfield redevelopment can be linked to Highland's broader community development plan.

### **Week 1 - May 6, 6.00 - 8.00 PM: Introduction to Brownfields**

This opening session will focus on three topics. The first will be a definition of brownfields, and the second will focus on the brownfield challenge(s) in the Highland community. The third topic will discuss planning and visioning for brownfield reuse within a neighborhood revitalization strategy.

### **Week 2 - May 13: Step One and Step Two Nomination Studies**

This session will provide a discussion of both Step One and Step Two Nomination Studies, with the great emphasis placed on the purpose and activities involved in a Step Two Nomination Study.

### **Week 3 - May 20: Employment Opportunities and Brownfield Reclamation**

This session will explore two interrelated themes. The opening session will examine the technical aspects of brownfield remediation and discuss the role of the federal and state governments in brownfield reclamation. This discussion will also include issues such as land acquisition and the various levels of contamination. The second session will discuss the different types of employment opportunities that can occur at various phases of a reclamation project and discuss the role of Step Two studies in anticipating employment opportunities.

### **Week 4 - May 27: Redevelopment Options**

This assistance will provide detailed information about brownfields reuse options that are outside the traditional economic uses that have dominated early brownfields redevelopment.

### **Week 5 - June 3: Provide Feed-back at Public Open Houses**

This session will examine the types of reporting that occurs at the various public open houses and helps participants think through ways to critique reports, reflect on projects goals and objectives, and how to provide useful feedback. The duties and responsibilities of the steering committee will also be discussed.

### **Week 6 - June 10: Bus Tour of Brownfields on the Niagara Frontier**

The bus tour will focus on brownfield sites in the Buffalo Avenue area, Love Canal, and developments in Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada and St. Catharines, along with the Highland Avenue area.

[ShapeHighlandsFuture.com](http://ShapeHighlandsFuture.com)

## **Brownfields Opportunity Area (BOA)**

### **Mini-Course-Week 1 Agenda**

**May 6, 2008**

#### **Meet the Project Team**

#### **What Is A Brownfields?**

- a. An opening prayer
- b. Introductions of the Project Team
- c. A brief overview of the mini-course
- d. An overview of the course folder and hand-outs
- e. Guest speaker Gregory Sutton from the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC); presentation topic: What is A Brownfields?  
Power point presentation, during which Greg will interact with stakeholders in an informal question and answer period
- f. Planning and visioning neighborhood revitalization in the Highland Community.  
Use of a flip chart to capture and record stakeholders visions and dreams for their neighborhood
- g. Attendee comments, overview of the coming week and comments of appreciation.

## **Brownfields Opportunity Area (BOA)**

### **Mini-Course-Week 2 Agenda**

**May 13, 2008**

#### **Meet the Project Team & Attendees What is a Step 1 & Step 2 Nomination Study?**

- a. An opening prayer
- b. An overview of the course folder for new attendees and descriptions of Week 2 hand-outs. Deliver CD's and/or hard copies of the Greg Sutton's presentation from week 1 along with the "wish list" for a revitalized Highland Community area.
- c. Attendee Introductions with a focus on background and expectations for the revitalization process.
- d. USI Speaker Introductions: Ross Burnett & Shonda Wang; presentation topic: What is a Step 1 & Step 2 Nomination Study?
- e. Questions for the guest presenters and the Project Team.
- f. Attendee comments, overview of the coming week and comments of appreciation.

## **Brownfields Opportunity Area (BOA)**

### **Mini-Course-Week 3 Agenda**

**May 20, 2008**

#### **Employment Opportunities & Brownfields Reclamation**

- a. An opening prayer
- b. Introduce William Bradberry who is the Niagara Falls City Administrator who will speak on land acquisition in the Highland Area. Mr. Bradberry took time out his busy schedule to join us tonight, but I promised his assistant Carmen that I would get him out of here by 6:30.
- c. Introduce Mark Baetzhold from the Dept of Environmental Conservation to discuss TAG or Technical Assistance Grants (TAG). On week 1 some people voiced concern about jobs for high school graduates and those with GED's. Mark suggested that stakeholders form a committee and apply for a TAG grant for outreach and he will tell us about the TAG grant now.
- d. An overview of the course folder for new attendees and descriptions of Week 3 hand-outs. Remind everyone that there are additional hand-outs from last week and go over this week's hand-outs.
- e. Touch briefly on the Brownfield training at UB.
- f. Introduce the speakers: John Glavin & Andrew McLellan (Environmental Education Associates), who will talk about job opportunities as a result of brownfield/remediation activities, as well as job opportunities in the "green economy".
- g. Questions for the guest presenters and the Project Team.
- h. Attendee comments, overview of the coming week and comments of appreciation.

**Brownfield's Opportunity Area (BOA)**  
**Mini-Course-Week 4 Agenda**  
**May 27, 2008**

**Redevelopment Options**

1. An opening prayer
2. An overview of the course folder for new attendees and descriptions of Week 4 hand-outs. Remind everyone that there are additional hand-outs from last week and go over this week's hand-outs.
3. Introductions - Dr. Taylor/James Pitts

Alan Nusbaum (Environmental Assistant)  
Email: [alan.nusbaum@niagarafallsny.gov](mailto:alan.nusbaum@niagarafallsny.gov)

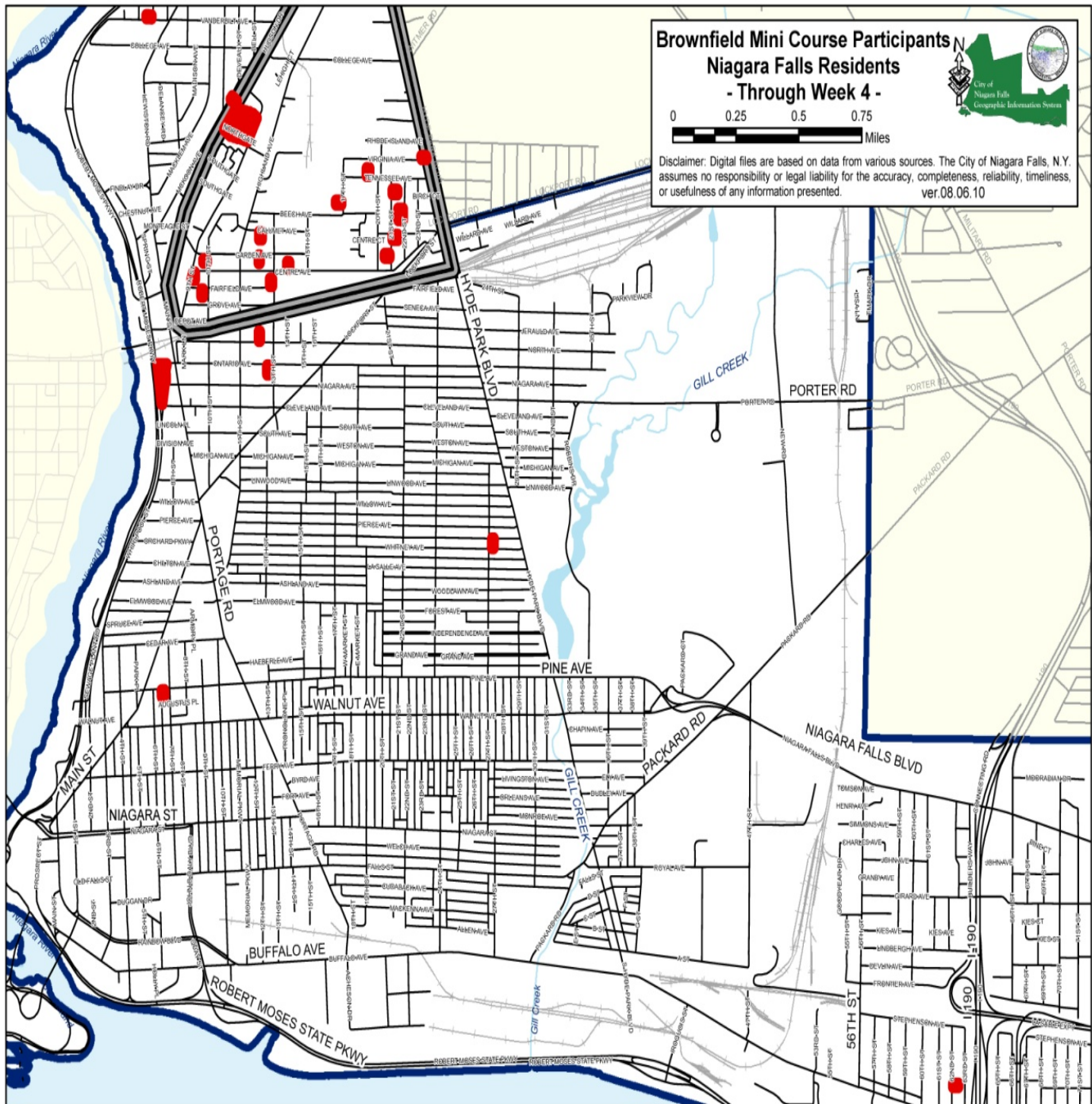
Mr. Thomas J. DeSantis, Senior Planner  
Phone: 716-286-4477  
Email: [thomas.desantis@niagarafallsny.gov](mailto:thomas.desantis@niagarafallsny.gov)

**City of Niagara Falls - Office of Planning and Environmental Services**  
Room 347 City Hall  
P.O. Box 69 Niagara Falls, NY 14302

4. **Office of Economic Development and the Niagara Falls Empire Zone** The Office of Economic Development and the Niagara Falls Empire Zone (NFEZ) aim to foster business and industrial development in the City of Niagara Falls. To accomplish this, we:
  - Provide technical support and assistance to firms seeking to expand into or relocate to the City
  - Provide economic information and technical assistance required by investors from the inquiry phase to the successful completion of a new project;
  - Market the City and NFEZ to targeted companies in the U.S. and abroad
  - Seek to assist established companies to retain local jobs and to expand to assist local companies located in the NFEZ to qualify as Zone businesses to avail themselves of incentives for job creation and expansion
  - Maintain an inventory of available buildings and sites
  - Develop efficient funding sources for potential economic development projects
  - Promote the growth of light industry and tourism, working with other public team members such as the Niagara County Industrial Development Agency ([www.ncida.org](http://www.ncida.org)) and the Empire State Development Corporation ([www.state.ny.us](http://www.state.ny.us)).
5. Questions for the Project Team, attendee comments, overview of the coming week, and comments of appreciation.



## MAP OF MINI-COURSE ATTENDEES – WEEKS 1-4



## **Brownfield's Opportunity Area (BOA)**

### **Mini-Course-Week 5 Agenda**

**June 3, 2008**

#### **Provide Feed-back at Public Open Houses**

- a. An opening prayer with the Rev. Jones
- b. An overview of the course folder for new attendees and descriptions of Week 5 hand-outs. Remind everyone that there are additional hand-outs from last week and go over this week's hand-outs.
- c. Introduce Phil Haberstro, executive director of the Wellness Institute of Greater Buffalo & Western NY. Mr. Haberstro will conduct a power point presentation and respond to questions from the stakeholders & project team.
- d. Center for Urban Studies Staff will present information on the upcoming charrette.

*Description:* Charrettes take place in many disciplines, including [urban planning](#). In urban planning, the charrette has become a technique for consulting with all [stakeholders](#). Such charrettes typically involve intense and possibly multi-day meetings, involving [municipal](#) officials, [developers](#), and residents. A successful charrette promotes joint ownership of solutions and attempts to defuse typical confrontational attitudes between residents and developers. Charrettes tend to involve small groups, however, and the residents participating may not represent all the residents nor have the moral authority to represent them. Residents who do participate get early input into the planning process. For developers and municipal officials charrettes achieve community involvement, may satisfy [consultation](#) criteria, with the objective of avoiding costly legal battles. Other uses of the term "charrette" occur within an academic or [professional](#) setting, whereas urban planners invite the general public to their planning charrettes. Thus most people (unless they happen to be design students) encounter the term "charrette" in an urban-planning context.

- e. Questions for the Project Team.
- f. Attendee comments, overview of the bus tour, and comments of appreciation.



## Brownfield's Opportunity Area (BOA)

### Mini-Course-Week 6 Agenda

June 10, 2008

#### Brownfield Bus Tour

5:15pm – Meet at Doris Jones Center

5:30pm – Depart Doris Jones Center for BlueCross/BlueShield-HealthNow building in Buffalo

6:00pm – Arrive at BlueCross/BlueShield-HealthNow building in Buffalo  
(257 West Genesee Street, Buffalo, NY 14202)

- *Susan Highmiller said to park on 7<sup>th</sup> Street, cross the street, enter through the glass doors, and ask for her at the reception desk. Her cell number is 609-3431.*
- **Tour and Presentation from Dennis Gorski (VP of Policy and Representation) on the evolution and process that lead to the project's completion.**
  - Dennis will need to leave for a 7pm dinner, so Susan Highmiller (Property/Facilities Coordinator) will finish if Dennis has to leave. I advised her that 15-20 minutes will be fine.

6:30-6:40pm – Leave for North Tonawanda site

7:00pm – Arrive at Remington-Rand site in North Tonawanda  
(184 Sweeney Street, North Tonawanda, NY 14120)

- **Presentation and viewing of architectural renderings by Chuck Bell (Town of North Tonawanda Community Development Department). I advised Chuck that someone will call him once the vans leave HealthNow. His cell number is 228-5439.**

7:30pm – Leave for Highland Avenue – visit selected brownfield sites in the community.

8:15pm - Return to Doris Jones Center

- Maulito Loman will be at the ATTAIN lab awaiting our return. If you need to call him, his cell number is 906-0696.

## FIRST COMMUNIQUE FOR OPEN HOUSE #1

### The Highland Avenue Community Brownfield Opportunity Area —Step Two Nomination Study

#### "BROWNFIELDS MUST GO...!"

Our time  
has come!

**City leaders built the Highland Avenue Community around a Brownfield.** These polluted lands consist of abandoned, idled, and under-used industrial and commercial facilities. Contamination and other environmental threats complicate their redevelopment.

**Highland is on the move.** The Unity Park and Centre Court housing project are proof of that progress. However, the Brownfields pose a big obstacle to this forward motion. They can hold back the revitalization of this community.

**Now, we have an opportunity to do something about the Highland Avenue Community Brownfield problem.** However, before we can solve this problem, we must understand it and formulate our own ideas about solutions.

**This is where the Step 2 Nomination Study comes into play.** Its purpose is to identify a series of Brownfield redevelopment projects which can stimulate the community's complete revitalization. This nomination study is the "first step" toward turning the neighborhood's "Brownfields" into "Greenfields," which will bring new life to Highland.

**Only the involvement of the Highland Community can make this happen!**

**We need to develop the Brownfields in a way that benefits the entire community.** If the residents themselves do not participate in the project, there is a good chance that Brownfield development will not help the community. In fact, it is likely that the redevelopment could actually hurt Highland. The result might be more "dirty" factories and jobs might go to people who live outside the neighborhood. Anything could happen.

**The community cannot afford to take this chance. We must all be involved.**

The Brownfield Step 2 Nomination Study has already started. It is now in the organizational phase. We need Community input now.

The study will last about 20 months, with most of the work occurring during the first twelve months. The next sixty days are critical ones. During this period, there will be a meeting of stakeholders. The Steering Committee, which oversees the study, will be set up and then the City will introduce the project to the community.

**James Pitts and Professor Henry Louis Taylor, Jr., of the UB Center for Urban Studies, will lead the project's community outreach component. Their job is to make sure that the Highland Community's hopes and aspirations drive this project.**

## NIAGARA GAZETTE ARTICLE PRIOR TO OPEN HOUSE #1

HIGHLAND AVENUE: Cleaning up a legacy

Page 1 of 2



### HIGHLAND AVENUE: Cleaning up a legacy

By Dan Miner/minerd@gnewspringer.com  
Niagara Gazette

— Driving through the Highland Avenue neighborhood with Alan Nusbaum and Willie Dunn can feel like a study in optimism.

To Dunn, executive director of the Highland Community Revitalization Committee, every empty factory is an opportunity, the streets are safer than they once were and a sense of community is reemerging among residents.

"I think there is tremendous potential for this community to grow," he said. "There's families that want to have nice homes. There's people willing to build in the community."

But despite the hopeful tone, Dunn can't help but mention the neighborhood's low-income shackles. Riding past a large, newly built home on Virginia Avenue, Dunn swells with pride that the new owners chose the Highland neighborhood. But, he adds, loans to build the house were extremely difficult to come by — a problem which doesn't exist along the tree-lined streets of DeVeaux, just across the real and symbolic railroad tracks.

The high-crime label still exists for the area and there are too many renter-occupied homes, Dunn says. For all of its numerous challenges, none looms larger than the hundreds of acres of brownfields, ranging from sprawling, abandoned factory sites to small plots of land once used by small businesses.

Thus the purpose for the neighborhood tour: To explain a \$400,000 state grant that Dunn, Nusbaum, who is a volunteer in the city's Planning Department, and a host of other interested parties say will create a community-based plan to revive the neighborhood, bringing investment and jobs.

"It's a really, really important opportunity for the community to begin to define their own future," said Mark Reid, a consultant with Urban Strategies Inc., the Toronto-based firm hired by the City of Niagara Falls to work on the project. "That's always exciting for any community."

Money to go towards master plan

The city received word in Fall 2004 that it had been awarded the Brownfield Opportunity Area grant from the state Department of Conservation for the Highland neighborhood. Almost three years later, in summer 2007, the funds finally became available.

In the end, the program will produce a master plan for the area's brownfields, including a comprehensive environmental review, possible future uses of properties and a summary of tax credit and funding opportunities for area businesses. The entire process should wrap up in Spring 2009.

But those involved say the plan's effectiveness depends wholly on community involvement. The best people to decide a neighborhood's future are the people who live there, said Zach Casale, a member of the Main Street Business Association who's also working on the project as part of his graduate studies in planning at the University of Buffalo.

That's why hopes are high for tonight's meeting, a kickoff event from 6 to 8 p.m. today at the Doris W. Jones Family Resource Building on Ninth Street.

"The plan is coming from the people," Casale said. "We'll have the expertise of professionals to guide and show the way to do this, but you don't want people from out-of-state to say this is what we're going to do."

Reasons to invest

In terms of tax discounts, it would be hard to find an area in which more are available to businesses than the Highland neighborhood. It's officially designated a federal Renewal Community, which provides employment tax credits and capital gains exclusion, and a state Empire Zone. Those programs have used to create several success stories in the area. Those include:

n Standard Auto Wreckers: A Canadian-based company which buys and takes apart used vehicles and then sells their parts, purchased a 170,000-square-foot site at 3800 Highland Ave. in Feb. 2006. They employ 30



full-time workers.

n Braun Horticulture: Another Canadian-based company which has been at its Highland Avenue location since 1988. Braun recently expanded across the street to a larger facility.

“(Both designations) are really catching on, marketing-wise,” said Ralph Aversa, executive director of NFC Corp., the city’s lending arm. “If I were a business today, I’d be in both.”

The state also offers its Brownfield Cleanup Program, offering tax breaks in return for cleaning up and redeveloping brownfields. Alternatives Resources Management Inc., an affiliate of Falls-based Santarosa Holdings Inc., has been accepted into the program. The company plans to renovate 13 acres of the old Union Carbide Co. site at 1501 College Ave. and create as many as 75 new jobs for its businesses, which involves shredding scrap vehicle tires to produce various rubber products and recyclable metal.”

Bringing HOPE to the community

Further optimism has been spurred by recent activity, including the HOPE VI and Unity Park housing projects, the future construction of a police substation and community resource center and a proposed International Rail Station and Intermodal Transportation Center on Lewiston Road.

Nearby, on Main Street, a \$44.6 million public safety complex is under construction and the North Star at the North End movement is aimed at turning the street into a cultural heritage attraction.

“Highland is a community that was literally built around our industrial heritage,” said Henry Taylor, who is the director of the Center for Urban Studies at the University at Buffalo and is involved with the program.

“When many of these buildings and industries left, they left behind buildings and structures not used along with the resources that went with them. But they also left huge obstacles that stand in the way of that neighborhood being able to develop itself.”

#### IF YOU GO

- WHAT: Highland Avenue Brownfield Opportunity Area Open House
- WHEN: 6 to 8 p.m., today
- WHERE: Doris W. Jones Family Resource Building, 3001 Ninth St.
- MORE INFO: Call 465-1515

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FLYER DISTRIBUTED THROUGHOUT THE NEIGHBORHOOD FOR OPEN HOUSE #1

## SHAPE HIGHLANDS FUTURE!

### What Can These Become?

Parks, museums, residential areas, employment centers (private sector industrial and non-industrial jobs), and welcoming spaces...

**Find Out About the Study that will Answer this Question!**

**Seize The  
Opportunity  
to build a  
Better Tomorrow!**



### We Need Your Ideas!

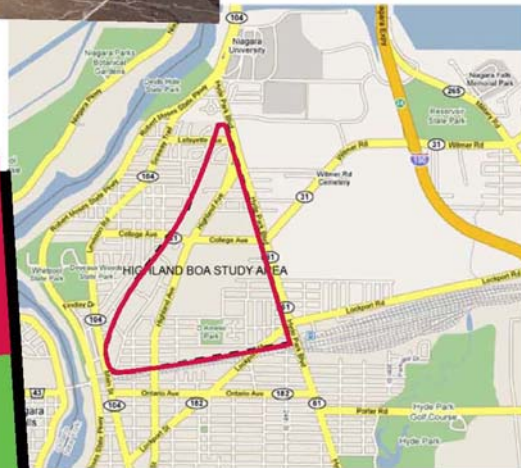
#### Open House, April 1

The Highland Community  
Brownfield Opportunity Area (BOA)  
Step Two Nomination Study

Doris W. Jones Family  
Resource Building  
3001 Ninth Street  
Niagara Falls NY, 14305

6:00 -- 8:00 p.m.  
Light refreshments will be provided

For additional information, call 465-1515



**URBAN  
STRATEGIES  
INC.**

**UB Center for Urban Studies**  
University at Buffalo The State University of New York

**TVGA**  
CONSULTANTS  
EXPERTS WHO CARE

**ERA**  
Economics Research Associates

## SHAPE HIGHLANDS FUTURE!

### Why You Need to Come to the Open House, April 1

**Highland is on the move.** Positive change is occurring throughout the area with Unity Park and Centre Court housing projects being proof of that progress. However, much of the wider Highland area remains dominated by under-utilized or vacant brownfield industrial sites. These sites are contributing to the negative perception of the community and may have potential longer-term environmental issues that we need to address. The quality of many of these sites remains unknown.

**Now, you have an opportunity to influence the future of these brownfield sites in and around the Highland area.**

Through the New York State Department of State Brownfield Opportunity Area Program (BOA), the City of Niagara Falls has secured a significant grant to help the Highland area understand the condition of brownfield sites in the area and explore options for their restoration to more sustainable uses, such as parks, recreation and residential uses as well as new types of employment.

**Your involvement in this project is important for ensuring that your concerns are heard and that your dreams for change are recognized – help us change a negative into a positive.**

### What the BOA 2 Step Nomination Study is

Through the BOA Step 2 Nomination study process, we would like to hear from you how these sites are affecting your community and what you would like to see done with them. The Step 2 Nomination document will identify potentially valuable brownfield sites and then make recommendations for their future uses and redevelopment that will contribute to area's revitalization.

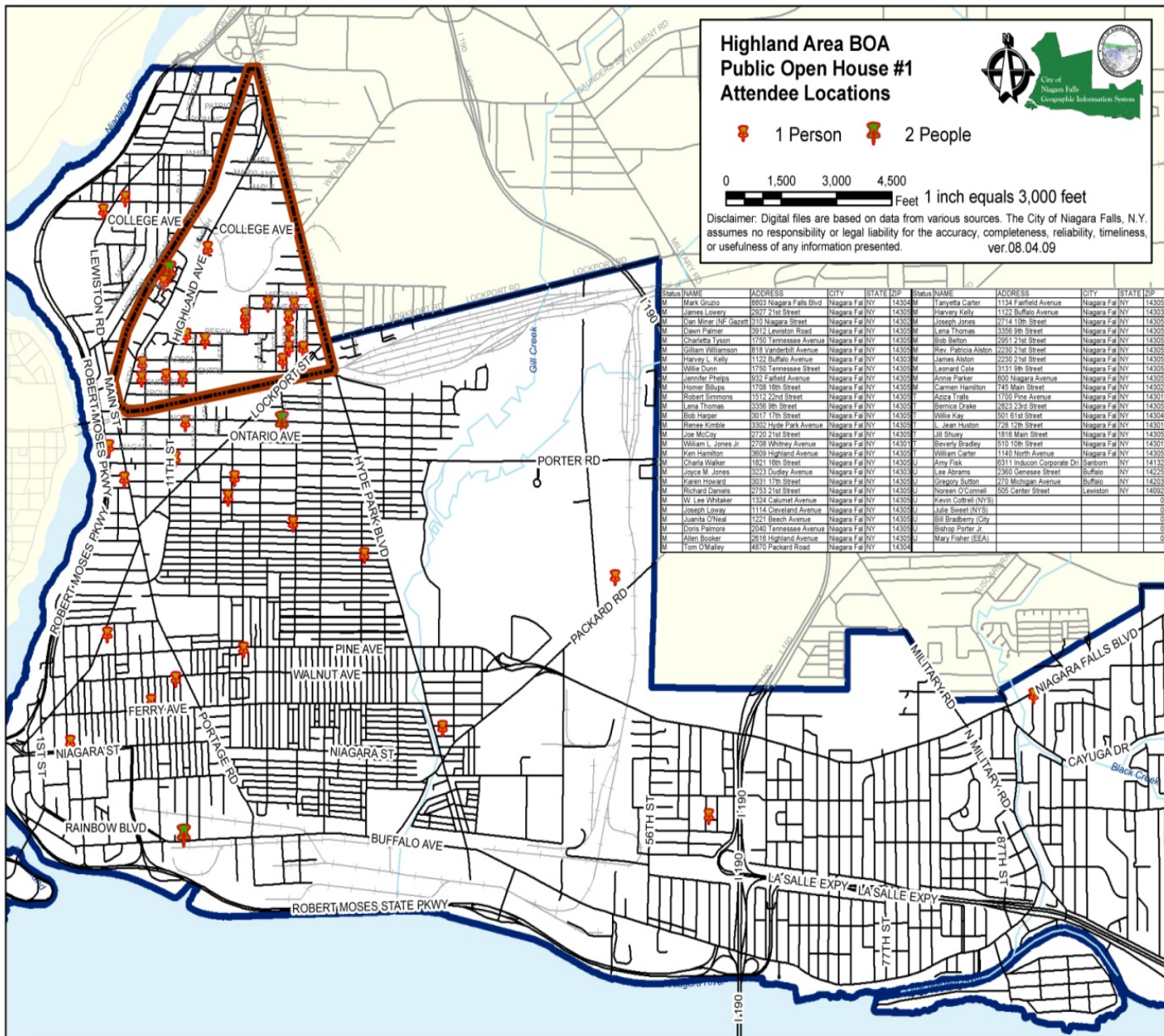
Jointly funded by the City of Niagara Falls and New York State, a diverse team of professionals is involved, including environmentalists, urban planners, designers and economists. James Pitts and Professor Henry Louis Taylor, Jr., of the UB Center for Urban Studies, will lead the project's community outreach component. Their job is to make sure the Highland Community is fully integrated into every step of the project and that your voice as a community is heard.

### We Need You!





## MAP OF ATTENDEES – OPEN HOUSE #1



**HELP SHAPE  
HIGHLAND'S FUTURE!**

**JUNE  
19**  
6:00 to 8:00 PM  
Doris Jones Resource Center

Come to **THE FIRST  
VISIONING SESSION**

- 1 Share your thoughts on what the future of your community can be
- 2 Make it known what your goals are for the community over the next 5, 10 and 20 years
- 3 Help the team to understand what makes Highland a unique community
- 4 Work with the team to identify the best things about the Highland community
- 5 Work with the team to identify the biggest problems in the community

Thursday, June 19th from 6:00 to 8:00 PM, The Doris Jones Resource Center, Highland Avenue Community





**HELP SHAPE HIGHLAND'S FUTURE!**

**THIS EVENT IS ABOUT "SETTING THE STAGE FOR CHANGE" AND WORKING WITH THE STUDY TEAM TO HELP US GET A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF YOUR DREAMS FOR HIGHLAND, YOUR CURRENT CONCERNS WITH THE NEIGHBORHOOD, AND WHAT YOU SEE AS PRIORITIES FOR CHANGE.**

**JUNE**

**19**

**6:00 to 8:00 PM**  
Doris Jones Resource Center



FLYER DISTRIBUTED THROUGHOUT THE NEIGHBORHOOD FOR OPEN HOUSE #3

**UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUES: HELP  
RE-SHAPE THE FUTURE OF HIGHLAND  
AT OUR NEXT COMMUNITY**

# **OPEN HOUSE**

**OCT 23**

**DORIS JONES FAMILY RESOURCE CENTER,  
3001 9th STREET, NIAGARA FALLS NY, 14301  
THURSDAY, OCTOBER 23RD, 5:30PM – 8:00PM.**

**FOOD & DRINKS SERVED FROM 5:00PM.  
FOR ADDITIONAL INFO: 716-465-1515**



## **IDEAS FOR HIGHLAND'S FUTURE**

**Come and hear our findings and share your ideas for a new, brighter  
future for Highland - including new land uses, new types of businesses,  
new community uses, new employment uses and new opportunities for  
change. Help re-shape Highland by transforming its brownfields and  
creating a bright Vision for the future.**

Learn more about the Brownfield Opportunity Area Project. Go to the Attain Laboratory and visit our website at:

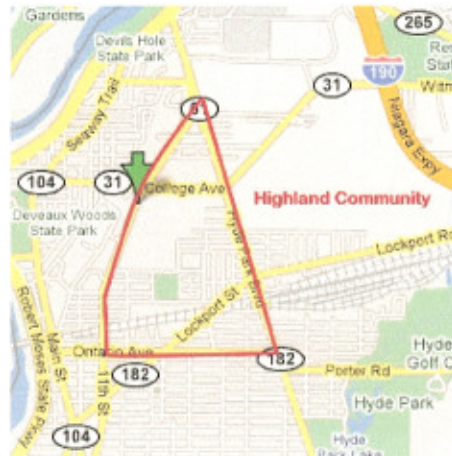
**[WWW.SHAPEHIGHLANDSFUTURE.COM](http://WWW.SHAPEHIGHLANDSFUTURE.COM)**

This document was prepared for the City of Niagara Falls, the Highland Community Revitalization Committee, Inc., the New York State DOS and the New York State DEC with State funds provided through the Brownfield Opportunity Area Program, with additional funds provided by USEPA.





# The Revitalization of the Highland Community



## *Opportunities for Development, Housing and Employment in the North End*

Date: Sept. 23, 2008

Time: 6:00pm

Place: Doris Jones  
Family Resouce Bldg.



Highland Community  
Revitalization Committee, Inc.  
1750 Tennessee Avenue  
Niagara Falls, NY 14305  
Ph: (716) 282-2325

### COME AND HEAR PRESENTATIONS REGARDING:

Globe Metallurgical, Inc. (Job Opportunities)

Santarosa Holdings, Inc. (Job Opportunities)

St. Mary's Neighborhood Clinic (New Construction)

Homebuyer Education

Highland BOA Update

Tract II Site Clean-up

HOPE VI Update

Unity Park II



# Buffalo News

## Future of Highland Avenue to be discussed today

*Public meeting at 5 p. m. will focus on cleanup of old industrial sites in Falls' North End*

By Denise Jewell Gee  
NEWS NIAGARA BUREAU  
October 23, 2008

NIAGARA FALLS — City residents will have the chance to speak out today about what they would like to see for the future of the Highland Avenue community as government agencies try to clean up old industrial sites and breathe new life into vacant properties.

A team developing a study to create a state Brownfield Opportunity Area in the neighborhoods surrounding Highland Avenue will hold its third public meeting at 5 p. m. in the Doris W. Jones Community Resource Building, 3001 Ninth St.

The public meeting is part of a series of open houses designed to help shape a plan for addressing brown-fields — typically vacant and contaminated industrial sites — in a 560-acre area of the city's North End.

"This is the really critical moment and critical period," said Henry Taylor Jr., director of the Center for Urban Studies at the University at Buffalo. "We've been working with the neighborhood and the community very closely over this period, and in particular, we've been able to get some very significant input from the neighborhood in terms of the things that they want to see happen."

The team is developing an in-depth analysis of the area and a plan to revitalize its neighborhoods. It is funded through a \$375,000 Brownfield Opportunity Area grant the city qualified for in 2004.

The Rev. William T. Spencer, chairman of the Highland Community Revitalization Committee, said community leaders have been focused for two decades on getting former industrial sites in the North End

cleaned up.

"The Highland area, this is the main corridor for the African American community. This used to be a very industrial area," Spencer said. "Those companies have closed down and



moved, and they left this area contaminated. So here again, we've been trying to get this area cleaned up and hopefully get some industry back in here."

Spencer said several recent developments — including the planned reopening and expansion of the Globe Metals plant — have given community leaders hope that the neighborhood is on its way up.

Part of the Highland study includes developing ways to connect community members to redevelopment opportunities, Taylor said.

The 18-month program included a six-week mini-course to teach residents about brown-fields.

The team — which includes several consulting firms, including Urban Strategies of Toronto — expects to complete and submit the study to the state early next year.

"It's not just a brownfield remediation project," Taylor said. "But it's a brownfield remediation project that will be used to spark the regeneration of the entire community, and that's why this open house is so important."

[djgee@buffnews.com](mailto:djgee@buffnews.com)

## **Niagara Gazette**

### **NIAGARA FALLS: Rebuilding a better Highland**

**By Rick Forgione**

October 23, 2008 10:11 pm

— Ritchie Gore has a long wish list of ideas and development projects to revitalize Highland Avenue and the surrounding North End neighborhoods.

For starters, the depressed area could use its own grocery store and gas service station. Once those basic essentials are in place, she wouldn't mind a few "green" industrial businesses or medical offices to open and begin offering jobs.

Maybe then, children wouldn't have to leave the neighborhood, let alone the city.

"My kids grew up in this neighborhood but went to college someplace else and now live somewhere else," said Gore, who has lived in the Highland community for 26 years. "If it wasn't so bad here, then maybe they would've been able to stay. You can't dwell on all of the broken promises and what's happened in the past, you have to work for the future." For the North End, that future is now — and residents are being asked to shape it.

Close to 50 people attended a forum Thursday at the Doris Jones Family Resource Center to hear a presentation by Urban Strategies Inc., which was hired by the city in January to help the Highland community become a Brownfield Opportunity Area.

Brownfields are typically defined as property on which development is hindered by contamination or the possibility of contamination. Opportunity areas are eligible for state employment credits, which are enticing to new businesses or expansions.

In 2004, the city received a \$375,000 grant to develop a revitalization plan targeting 560 acres of land classified as brownfields in the North End. Of that area, close to 200 acres is currently vacant land, said Mark Reid, a partner with Urban Strategies.

Thursday's community forum represented the halfway point of the four-tier process, which is expected to be completed by next spring and will result in a detailed master plan submitted to the state for the redevelopment of brownfields and other revitalization strategies.

"How do we make this Highland community a better place to live, work, play and raise a family?" asked Henry Taylor, director of the Center for Urban Studies, which is one of the partners in the process. "That's why we're all here tonight."

Urban Strategies presented an analysis of the challenges facing the Highland community and an outline of the opportunities, including capitalizing on the alternative energy and tourism industries. Following the 45-minute presentation, the audience was split into work groups and encouraged to develop ideas for development that may be implemented into the master plan.

"We want you to help us better what we have here," said Urban Strategies Inc. partner Melanie Hare. "Tell us what you want Highland to be in the next 10 to 20 years."

Taylor, whose team has conducted countless interviews with North End residents, said every request and proposal has had a common theme.

"No matter what we do, make sure we get more jobs into this community," he said.

"We've heard that over and over again."



## Can Harriet Tubman lure tourists?

**By Denise Jewell Gee – Buffalo NEWS NIAGARA BUREAU**

**Updated: 09/28/08 6:51 AM**

NIAGARA FALLS — Evidence that Harriet Tubman used a suspension bridge that once spanned the Niagara River has been around for 139 years.

In her own words, Tubman described one of her journeys through Niagara Falls to biographer Sarah Hopkins Bradford. It was Tubman's seventh or eighth trek from Maryland to Canada to bring fugitive slaves to freedom.

As she crossed over the bridge into Canada with four companions, Tubman directed her fellow travelers to look upstream to the falls. The waters of the Niagara roared below them.

Bradford's biographical "Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman" has been in print since 1869.

But the history has long been overshadowed in tourist exhibits that surround Niagara Falls.

Now, state and city officials are working to change that. A plan to create a museum in Niagara Falls dedicated to the

Underground Railroad moved forward this month and could soon get a permanent staff member.

Attorneys for the city and the state's Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation are finalizing an agreement to dedicate a state parks employee, Kevin E. Cottrell, to develop the interpretive center in a city-owned stone building that once housed a U. S. Customs House.

The new museum would serve as a gateway from the site of the old suspension bridge to a cultural district on north Main Street focused on Underground Railroad heritage.

The neighborhood will build on two decades of work by Cottrell and others to turn the region's rich history into a product that will draw tourists to Underground Railroad sites throughout Western New York.

"We want to bring those people out of the periphery of State Parks, get them into the city of Niagara Falls, send them to Lewiston, send them off to Lockport — Lockport is important — and then ultimately send them off to Erie County," Cottrell said. "We're

the gateway."

The planned museum will be the region's second permanent exhibit on the Underground Railroad. The first opened two years ago in the Castellani Art Museum at Niagara University.

But in Niagara Falls State Park, daredevils, park luminary Frederick Law Olmsted and electric engineer Nikola Tesla still get more attention in exhibits and statues than Harriet Tubman's work at the suspension bridge.

It may be just the right time to develop the new attraction.

Officials are moving forward with the plans at a time when a nonfiction book on Niagara Falls that highlights its significance on the Underground Railroad is receiving national attention.

Ginger Strand, author of "Inventing Niagara, Beauty, Power and Lies," parallels the pre-Civil War escapades of tight-rope walker Charles Blondin in Niagara Falls with fugitive slaves that were escaping to Canada a few miles downriver.

"I think we're just recovering that history," Strand said last week during a WBFO-FM "Meet the Author" series talk. "It's a difficult time in American history to talk about. It's not a very feel good time, whereas stunting, everyone's always interested in that because it's sensational."

The difficulty in chronicling the story of the Underground Railroad, compared with the highly publicized antics of Niagara Falls daredevils, is that the long journeys to freedom for slaves traveling along the metaphorical railroad were supposed to be secret.

There is nothing at the site of the old suspension bridge — long ago replaced by the Whirlpool Bridge — to denote the clandestine travelers who once crossed there to freedom.

"It's like doing the history of bootlegging," said Mayor Paul

A. Dyster. "It was designed not to leave trails. It's difficult to interpret for that reason, but we're trying."

The museum would be part of an estimated \$33 million project to turn the vacant U. S. Customs House into a new passenger rail station.

About \$2 million in federal transportation money already has been dedicated to restoring the stone building, and the city has applied for another \$306,836 in state grants and greenway funds for interior work for the interpretive center.

Officials envision that the museum will serve as a type of trail-head that will lead visitors to a heritage corridor on north Main Street focused on the Underground Railroad. A proposed park with a Harriet Tubman theme would link the two areas.



Officials also want to create a marker or statute near the base of the Whirlpool Bridge to denote where the suspension bridge once stood.

The plan would build on 20 years of work by Cottrell and others to develop the region's Underground Railroad lore into a niche heritage tourism product that could draw tourists throughout Western New York.

Cottrell said people outside the tourism industry often don't realize that the Whirlpool Bridge area has already become a pilgrimage for some travelers.

"The Whirlpool Bridge has now become an attraction," Cottrell said. "It was featured on the Travel Channel."

Dyster hopes the interpretive center and rail station will be a focal point for a number of activities geared toward travelers — whether it's exploring the Underground Railroad heritage or fishing in the Niagara River for steelhead.

"We've been saying for years this is a spectacular sight," Dyster said. "Absolutely spectacular because of the view from the bridge."

It's the same view Tubman was urging her travelers to see more than a century ago as they traveled north.

[djgee@buffnews.com](mailto:djgee@buffnews.com)



Kevin Cottrell would be the point man.