



VILLAGE CENTER CHARACTER AREA

Overview

Villages represent core areas of commerce, investment, and activity within Lewis County. Commonly referred to as “Main Street,” “Downtown,” or the “Central Business District” Village Center Character Areas are relatively compact with development focused along short stretches of state highways or flanking primary intersections. The land use mix of these centers typically includes retail, services, offices, schools, churches, parks, and municipal buildings. While they are characterized by a commercial concentration, most Village Centers in Lewis County also contain some single- and multi-family homes and upper-story apartments.

Village Centers can contain multi-story buildings located near or to the street line with minimal setbacks between structures. The ground floors of buildings are predominantly retail, office, and professional services, while upper story areas include offices and residences. These multi-story buildings, which typically define the precise center of the village, are surrounded by houses and single-story commercial buildings arranged in a less-dense pattern. Unfortunately, many of these buildings in Lewis County have vacancies, especially in upper stories.

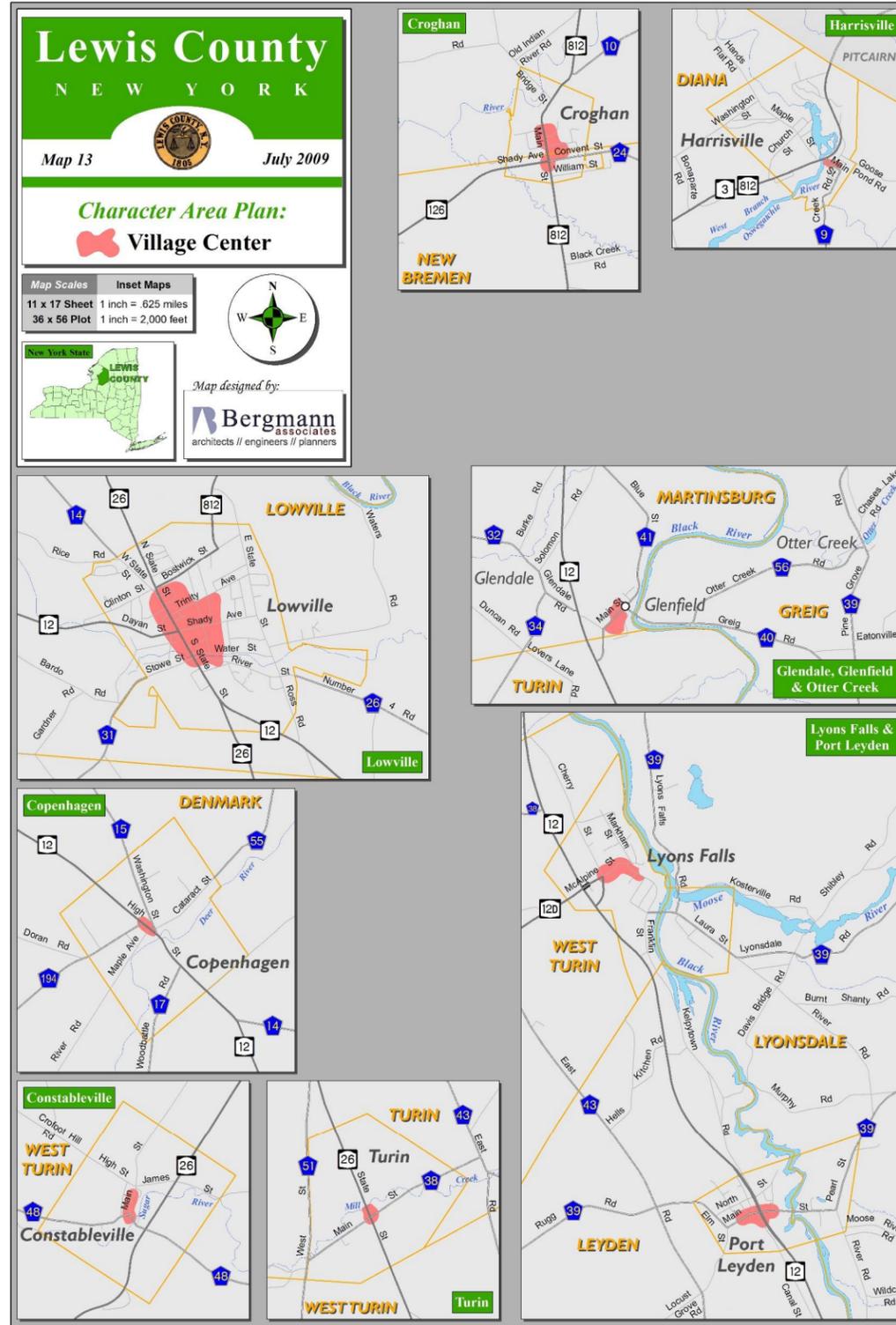
The architectural character of Village Centers is usually a vernacular style based on colonial revival and federal design patterns. On some main streets, the sidewalks are broadened to allow for enhanced pedestrian activity and the streetscape typically includes street trees, light poles, and other pedestrian amenities uniformly spaced along the right-of-way. Overall, these centers play a major role in defining the image and quality of life for their respective village, their surrounding town, and collectively for the entire county.

The Character Area Plan identifies Village Centers in the following locations:

- Harrisville
- Copenhagen
- Croghan
- Lowville
- Glenfield*
- Lyons Falls
- Port Leyden
- Constableville
- Turin

** Although Glenfield is not an incorporated village, its residential areas have a similar character to other villages. Therefore, the recommendations in this section are relevant to Glenfield.*

Turin and Castorland are the other incorporated villages in the county, yet they lack a distinct and substantial commercial center. From the list above, Lowville and Croghan have the most established Village Centers, with numerous local businesses and consistent pedestrian traffic. Lowville is four times larger than the next largest village in the county, and is the only locality with a noticeable presence of three to four story buildings.



Activating Upper Stories

There are numerous psychological, economic, and social benefits to re-activating upper stories in Village Center buildings. The Village of Lowville in particular would benefit greatly from the added activity in the thousands of square feet of space currently vacant and idle in its Village Center.

Benefits

- The utilization of upper stories will re-activate the entire building façade throughout the day, with activity flowing out to the street level in the form of foot traffic. The added visual activity will improve the appearance and impression of a vibrant and healthy community.
- Economic benefits impact the individual building and the surrounding businesses through the addition of foot traffic. Additional foot traffic and improved vibrancy will lead to increased demand and higher rents. Additional foot traffic also leads to more consumer activity in the Village Center, and an expanded consumer pool.
- The addition of residences and offices will increase around-the-clock activity, and will spark demand for additional services and amenities such as parks, open spaces, sidewalks, and events.

Barriers

- Zoning and building codes often do not permit the mixed-use nature of multi-story buildings and the vertical organization of space.
- Code enforcement officers must be amenable to working with property owners within the New York State Uniform Fire Prevention Code to allow for the reuse of upper stories for residences.
- The lack of elevators in older multi-story buildings often limits the activities available to upper story areas, as well as the desirability of these spaces. Small cities, such as Oneonta, NY, provide precedents for the shared use of a single elevator amongst multiple buildings.



Revitalizing Main Street

The following represents potential options for municipalities to consider when revitalizing their 'Main Streets' or primary thoroughfares. Numerous tools and catalyst projects can be employed to kick-start a sustained reinvestment in existing commercial centers.

Formation of a Business Improvement District (BID)

- Formally recognized entity that provides enhanced services, such as safety, maintenance, and event coordination for a defined geographic area.
- BIDs help business owners work together and leverage resources in the attraction of customers to their district; increased foot traffic is beneficial to entire district.
- An additional flat assessment charged to BID members funds activities and services.
- Must be contiguous parcels, and must have agreement of 51 percent of the property owners or 51 percent of the assessed valuation within the proposed district.

Formation of a Local Development Corporation (LDC)

- LDCs are often established to focus on specific areas, such as a downtown, a waterfront area, a commercial corridor, or a specific site with redevelopment potential.
- The corporation is empowered by the New York State Department of State to establish programs that promote economic development.
- These programs are typically established for a variety of purposes such as attracting new business and industry, making physical improvements, retaining existing businesses, and administering loans.
- LDCs differ from BIDs as they do not have a finite geographic area, and are managed by a board of directors composed of local elected and appointed officials.

Focus on Infill Development

The limited growth taking place in Lewis County should be directed to existing Village Centers, enhancing their character, viability, and function and improving the quality of life for existing residents. The following are some of the benefits of infill development:

- Reduction in growth pressure on rural areas by absorbing growth;
- Help neighborhoods become more connected and sociable places;
- Fill gaps of existing community structure, provide continuity and enclosure; and
- Enhance circulation and walkability of a community by replacing vacant, deserted sites with end uses within walking distance of Village Living areas.

Example Infill Development



Public Space and Facade Improvements

- Improvements to streetscapes, parks, and plazas create an inviting atmosphere and help increase foot traffic.
- Façade improvement programs such as New York Main Streets assist property owners in making improvements to signage, storefronts, windows, and exteriors to improve their appearance.

Recommended Land Uses

Typical land uses recommended within Village Centers include retail, office, restaurants, accommodations, residential, institutional, public services and open space.

Design Considerations

There are numerous design elements and strategies associated with the revitalization and preservation of the county's village centers. These include concepts such as the vertical organization of space within multi-story buildings, the retention or attraction of pedestrian traffic generators, and the need to promote high-quality infill development within voids and vacant lots.

Village Centers are intended to be destinations and activity nodes for the village and outlying areas. As a result, the built environment should be pedestrian friendly in both design and development pattern. A primary driver of community character within Village Centers is the relationship between buildings and the street. As with development in Hamlets and Crossroads Character Areas, consistency of height and massing is extremely critical to the sense of place within Village Centers. The greater density and height of Village Center development creates distinct opportunities and challenges for communities striving to grow and revitalize.

Typical in most villages throughout New York, upper-story square footage is largely vacant and/or boarded up. The impact of the non-use of these spaces can be perceived economically, visually, and psychologically through the loss of activity and foot traffic. The re-activation of these upper-story areas is critical to the future of the village centers. Villages and small cities throughout New York and the nation are experiencing a dramatic increase in the desire of people to relocate into centers of activity. The upper-story spaces of existing buildings are perfect opportunities for new residential units, providing added vitality and foot traffic to individual properties and adjacent businesses, while improving community atmosphere. See the sidebar on page 113 for further discussion of upper-story residential and the vertical organization of space within Village Centers.

In addition to the re-activation of upper-story spaces, Lewis County's Village Centers can also be reinvigorated through policies that promote and encourage infill development. Over time, numerous vacant lots have appeared throughout county Village Centers as a result of fire, disinvestment, or abandonment. While these gaps detract from the physical environment, they

also pose opportunities to absorb future development within the community. See the sidebar at left for more information on the barriers to and benefits of infill development.

A potential tool to retain existing character and promote high-quality future development is the use of a form-based code. Unlike traditional zoning which controls development through regulations on the use of land, form-based codes dictate the form, appearance, and relationship of structures to each other and public spaces. By describing what a property owner "can do" rather than "can't do," a form-based code provides a greater level of consistency and reliability during the development and site plan review process. See the sidebar below for more information on form-based codes.

Definition of a Form-Based Code

A form-based code is a method of regulating development to create predictable public spaces primarily by controlling physical form, with a lesser focus on land use. These types of regulations address the relationship between building facades and public spaces, the form and mass of buildings in relation to one another, and the scale and types of streets and blocks. The regulations and standards in form-based codes are presented in both diagrams and words, and are keyed to a map (regulating plan) that designates appropriate locations for distinct areas based on the form and scale (and therefore, character) of development, rather than only distinctions in land use types. Form-based codes are regulatory tools, and should not be confused with design guidelines or general statements of policy.

The following are some benefits of form-based codes (FBCs):

- FBCs are prescriptive (they state what you want), rather than proscriptive (what you don't want), and therefore can achieve a more predictable physical result.
- FBCs work well in established communities because they effectively define and codify a neighborhood's existing "DNA." Vernacular building types can be easily replicated, promoting infill that is compatible with surrounding structures.
- FBCs may be more enforceable than design guidelines, as their stated purpose is the shaping of a high quality public realm, a presumed public good. Compliance with the codes can be enforced because a failure to comply would diminish the good that is sought.

In Lewis County, form-based code development is likely plausible for only the largest villages, and may not be necessary to expand beyond the Village Center Character Areas. The sustainability of existing character in the county's Village Centers is critical to expanding the tourism industry while protecting the quality of life for residents.

* Adapted from "Definitions of Form-Based Codes" and "Eight Advantages to Form-Based Codes," www.formbasedcodes.org, last accessed June 17, 2009.