

## IV. COMMERCIAL RESOURCES

Commercial Resources in Cortland are classified in this plan into three general types. These include “Highway Commercial”, “Neighborhood Commercial”, and the downtown or Central Business District. The former are detailed below, while the downtown is detailed in Section V. *Downtown*.

### HIGHWAY COMMERCIAL



The City of Cortland has three primary commercial areas or corridors that are best described as “Highway Commercial”. They are all located at major gateways into the City and include Clinton Avenue/Route 13 adjacent to Exit 11 of Interstate 81, (Exit 11 Gateway); Homer Avenue/Route 11, north of Cortland Regional Medical Center near the City’s northern boundary (Homer Avenue Gateway); and Port Watson Street/Route 11 just west of the Port Watson Street Bridge (Port Watson Gateway), (see Map 11 following this Section). Each of the gateways has their own distinct character.

Highway commercial areas are typified by auto-oriented development, as opposed to pedestrian oriented development found in traditional downtowns and neighborhood commercial areas. This type of development is usually located along or near major transportation routes, such as a State highway or Interstate exchange, has detached commercial structures with on-site parking, and often has few pedestrian connections. While “big-box” stores, malls and other large-scale commercial buildings are typical of highway commercial development, Cortland’s highway commercial areas are of a smaller scale. All three of the City’s highway commercial areas also serve as the City’s gateways and provide the first impression as one enters the City.

**Exit 11 Commercial Gateway** - The Exit 11/Clinton Avenue (Route 13) area of the East End Neighborhood is typical highway commercial development. It also serves as the primary gateway into the City of Cortland, is the preferred route to SUNY Cortland, and is the first impression many visitors have of Cortland. The Tioughnioga River, and the proposed Tioughnioga River Trail, bisect this gateway.



**Vacant commercial buildings give a very poor first impression of the City of Cortland.**



The Exit 11 area includes a number of national chain and franchise businesses, with at least five fast food restaurants, several quick serve restaurants, four hotels (a fifth is under construction), a gas station, Riverside Plaza Mall with a grocery store, and auto repair and parts businesses, to name a few. These businesses serve travelers on the interstate, as well as providing needed goods and services to City residents.

Riverside Plaza, a strip mall anchored by a grocery store and various smaller businesses, dominates this area. This mall, with several outbuildings, is located between Interstate 81 and the north bank of the River. The mall had been in a state of decline for many years, and eventually went into foreclosure. The Plaza was purchased by a private developer in late 2008. The new owner has begun investing in the facility and significant improvements were undertaken in the last year. They include installation of landscaped medians in the parking area, removal of excess paved areas, installation of a riverfront walking trail (part of the proposed Tioughnioga River Trail proposed for this area), and needed building maintenance such a roof repairs, painting, and minor façade repairs. More intensive façade renovations are planned for the near future.

The Plaza has long been anchored by a P&C supermarket. Penn Traffic, the owner of P&C, declared Chapter 11 Bankruptcy in the fall of 2009. In January of 2010, Tops Supermarkets purchased all P&C stores, including the Riverside Plaza location and a sister store on Homer Avenue. The Homer Avenue store was subsequently closed, leaving the Riverside Plaza store as the City's lone supermarket. It is yet unknown if the Riverside location will remain, be expanded, or closed.



**Monument signs, such as on the right, are more visually appealing and offer greater opportunities for creating a sense of place, as opposed to taller signs that can be visually unattractive (left).**

Unfortunately, the Exit 11 Commercial Gateway does not provide a suitable gateway, or entrance, into the community. A new bridge over the Tioughnioga River on Clinton Street was constructed in 2008 and greatly enhances the site. Despite this, nearby development does not take advantage of its riverfront location. Additionally, a long abandoned gas station is located south of the River at the intersection of Clinton Avenue, River Street, and Pomeroy Streets and



has long been an eyesore. Although the City has recently been able to undertake some limited cosmetic improvements for temporary use as a Jets visitor's center, the site remains a detriment to the area. Two nearby abandoned restaurants also detract from the character of the gateway. The streetscape is largely devoid of trees and other landscaping and is cluttered with signs and large paved areas. Although sidewalks are present in some of the area, bicycle and pedestrian access is difficult. Furthermore, the exceptionally tall high-rise signs nearest the exit detract from the viewshed. The architecture is ubiquitous commercial development found throughout the country, leaving the area with no sense of place and none of the historic character that can be found throughout the rest of the City.

The City must work to create a welcoming sense of place for the Exit 11 Commercial Gateway that provides an appropriate entrance for the community. This includes upgrading the streetscape; adopting site plan regulations requiring more greenspace and trees and limiting unbroken expanses of parking and impervious surfaces; improving the quality of business signs; limiting the height and number of high-rise signs; and developing minimum design standards to upgrade the architectural quality of commercial buildings. The intersection of Clinton, Pomeroy, and River Streets, adjacent to the Tioughnioga River, should be enhanced to create an attractive and welcoming gateway to the City. This gateway should help to brand the City and give the impression of a vibrant, progressive, and modern 21<sup>st</sup> century community.



The installation of curbed planting beds in the Riverside Plaza parking lot enhances the character of the development while improving traffic flow. Medians such as these should be required as part of any site plan review for future commercial projects.



Although franchise and chain stores have standard designs they prefer, as shown on the photo left, local municipalities can enact design guidelines that require buildings that better integrate into their surroundings and establish a sense of place, as shown on the photo right.



**Homer Avenue Gateway** – Northern Homer Avenue, from the City’s northern boundary southward to Wheeler Avenue is the City’s gateway from the Town of Cortlandville and Exit 12 of Interstate 81. This is particularly true for travelers to the Cortland Regional Medical Center, located one block to the south of Wheeler Avenue and the Cortland County Fairgrounds and the J.M. McDonald Sports Center, both a block to the west of Homer Avenue. The County’s Department of Public Works is located just to the east on the banks of the Tioughnioga River.

The area is dominated by the P&C Plaza, a small-to-medium sized shopping mall located between Carroll Street and Wheeler Avenue. The supermarket closed in early 2010, leaving a large vacant space in the mall and depriving neighborhood residents of an important service. Other commercial establishments are small scale and locally owned, including a gas station, liquor store, restaurant, diner, automotive repair, miscellaneous offices, and others. In some instances, businesses have located in former residential buildings, particularly on the east side of the street. A number of residences still remain, and most are older buildings in poor condition.



**Unbroken paved areas running from the street, to the sidewalk, to the parking lots are unattractive and provide poor traffic management. Replacing asphalt with landscaped medians and buffers, as shown on Drawing 2, greatly enhances the character of the streetscape.**

The lack of landscaping or a tree canopy, large expanse of asphalt, and rundown building conditions contribute to a very poor impression of the community. It should be noted that the same conditions continue north on Homer Avenue though the Town of Cortlandville to the Village of Homer. The Village of Homer’s new Comprehensive Plan (2010) highlights the need to improve the corridor and recommends a number of specific actions. The City needs to undertake similar actions to improve this gateway. The streetscape must be infused with additional trees and landscaping, and buildings must be renovated in order to develop a sense of place. As detailed in Section VI. *Housing*, this area is prime for redevelopment for hospital and medically oriented facilities. Conceptual plans for a portion of this area are included at the end of this Section as Drawing 1.

**Port Watson Street Gateway** – The Port Watson Street gateway runs from the Port Watson Street Bridge at the Tioughnioga River westward approximately two blocks to East Avenue, although some commercial development extends much of the way up the street, to the Central Business District. Of the three commercial gateways, this area has more residential development than the others, particularly on the south side of the street. The BOCES facility, located in a former strip mall, is a major presence in the area. Its large expanse of asphalt provides a poor first impression. More recent developments, such as a CFCU Credit Union





Bank and a Rite Aid pharmacy/convenience store, are better examples of the type of landscaping and site development that should be encouraged in this area and other commercial areas. Conceptual plans are included at the end of this Section as Drawing 2.



**Port Watson Street, as shown on the left photograph, suffers from the same lack of landscaping as other commercial areas in the City. New development along Port Watson Street, as shown on the right, is a better example of the type of site plan development that the City should require.**

## NEIGHBORHOOD COMMERCIAL

A number of smaller neighborhood commercial areas, and individual commercial uses, are scattered throughout the City. Neighborhood commercial areas/businesses are typically smaller in scale than highway commercial areas and are more apt to be locally owned and/or run businesses. These businesses provide essential goods and services to local residents, such as a corner grocery store or pharmacy, thus limiting the need to travel by automobile to reach stores. Neighborhood commercial development can also provide a sense of character and interest to the area, and are often local landmarks. Such development is typical in older cities such as Cortland.

Providing needed goods and services within walking distance of residential neighborhoods is an important concept in the New Urbanist and Smart Growth Movements current trends in community planning. Cortland, as a community that largely developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, is consistent with these planning movements.



Since these businesses are typically located in close proximity to residential areas, there is a potential that the uses will conflict, with concerns over noise, lighting, traffic, hours of



operation, and visual appearance. The City must carefully balance the desire to provide neighborhood goods and services with potential negative impacts to nearby residences. The City should assist and support neighborhood businesses where feasible while developing land use regulations that protect residential neighborhoods from incompatible commercial uses.

## GOALS AND IMPLEMENTATION MEASURES

**GOAL 11:** Visually improve the appearance of the City's Highway Commercial areas, to create a sense of place suitable for the City of Cortland, particularly gateways into the City.

### IMPLEMENTATION MEASURES:

- A) Revise the City sign ordinance for high-rise signs for businesses within 600 feet of a highway exit to significantly reduce their height and encourage sharing of signage poles. An amortization schedule should be adopted to ensure all signs are consistent with the ordinance within 10 years.
- B) Revise the City sign ordinance to limit primary site signage in highway commercial areas to monument style signs at the roadway and include standards for design of signs.
- C) Revise site plan design requirements for highway commercial areas to infuse more landscaping and greenspace, including trees, into developments and to create a better sense of place (*see conceptual site plan at the end of this Section*).
- D) Revise site plan design requirements for all site plans/developments with water frontage to embrace their waterfront locations and to incorporate water access into their site plans wherever possible and appropriate.
- E) Develop Minimum Design Guidelines for new buildings and major renovations to existing buildings in order to provide a consistent and attractive character to commercial areas.
- F) Undertake streetscape improvements at the Exit 11 area, Port Watson Street, and Homer Avenue in order to create welcoming and interesting gateways to the community. Special attention should be provided to the abandoned gas station on Clinton Street, the P&C plaza on Homer Avenue, and the BOCES plaza on Port Watson Street.
- G) Acquire and demolish and/or redevelop the abandoned gas station at the corner of Clinton Avenue and River Streets. Any redevelopment should limit direct access from Route 13 and provide greenspace along the roadway to improve the gateway into the City.



- H) Adopt a vacant building ordinance that imposes graduated and increasing fees or other disincentives regarding buildings left vacant for specified period of time. (see also Section XIV. *Land Use and Zoning*).

**GOAL 12:** Ensure pedestrian and bike access and safety.

**IMPLEMENTATION MEASURES:**

- A) All new developments should incorporate sidewalks and trails, connected to municipal sidewalks, in order to enhance pedestrian and bicycle access, and should accommodate the proposed Tioughnioga River Trail and other existing or future multi-modal trails or bike routes.
- B) Sidewalks/crosswalks crossing business entranceways should be of a contrasting color and material, such as brick, stone, or stamped concrete. Such crosswalks should be consistent throughout the area with signage to remind drivers of pedestrians.
- C) Require bicycle racks and similar non-motorized amenities as part of site plan review requirements (see also “Bike Ordinance” under Section XIV. *Land Use and Zoning*).

