

# Oswego, New York

## A Coastal Community Smart Growth Case Study

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### Oswego's Legacy

Located on the southern coast of Lake Ontario where the Oswego River and Canal flow into the lake, the city of Oswego was one of the principal shipping ports on the Great Lakes. From 1830s to 1870s, Oswego's economy boomed from the shipping of flour, grain, lumber, iron, salt and cornstarch by canal and rail. Industry flourished along these waterways as they became components of a vast transportation network from the East Coast to the Midwest.

As industry declined, jobs and people moved away from the city to towns and suburbs within Oswego County. Over the past five decades, the population has decreased substantially - from 1950 to 1970 and from 1980 to 2000 by 8.6 percent and 9.3 percent respectively. Conversely, the county as a whole experienced a population increase of 7 percent. The number of vacant storefronts and empty lots in the downtown area grew as strip malls and big box development on the fringe of the city became the primary centers of economic development for the area.

Oswego's industrial legacy left waste products that polluted the river and the surrounding watershed. When industrial activity along the city's riverfront died off, it left behind decrepit brick factories and other brownfields, some of which were also fraught with pollution.

The 1972 Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement, which commits the United States and Canada to restore and enhance water quality in the Great Lakes

system, provided an institutional framework to help address the watershed's polluted lands and thereby provided an impetus to revitalize the Oswego waterfront. Specifically, a 1987 amendment to the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement identified local Areas of Concern (AOCs) where beneficial uses of the ecosystem

had been significantly degraded, and obligated Canada and the United States to undertake steps to remediate these sites.

The Oswego River was among the 31 sites in the United States to be designated as an AOC.

Over the next 20 years, dozens of

public, private, local, state and federal partners collaborated on efforts to remediate, revitalize and redevelop the Oswego River AOC and its watershed. In June, 2006, the Oswego River AOC became the first U.S. AOC to be removed from the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement list of Great Lakes Areas of Concern.

Overcoming its early industrial development, Oswego in 2009 is growing as a culturally-diverse community, characterized by its college, service-based industries and energy generating facilities. The new and improved Oswego has many smart growth features, which are guided largely by the city's *Local Waterfront Revitalization Program* and *2020 Vision Comprehensive Plan*.

### Comprehensive Planning

The *Oswego 2020 Vision Comprehensive Plan* was initiated by the community leaders and officials to update the city's older outdated comprehensive plan. Adopted in June 2003, it provides a road



map for the city to achieve its vision of a place known for its neighborhoods, scenic natural resources, leisure and cultural assets, community leadership, strong economy and vital downtown area. Specific objectives and associated implementation actions laid out in the plan drove the implementation of various smart growth elements listed in Table 1 and described in detail below.

**Local Waterfront Revitalization Program**

The *Local Waterfront Revitalization Program* (LWRP), adopted in 1986, is both a planning document as well as a program established to implement the plan.

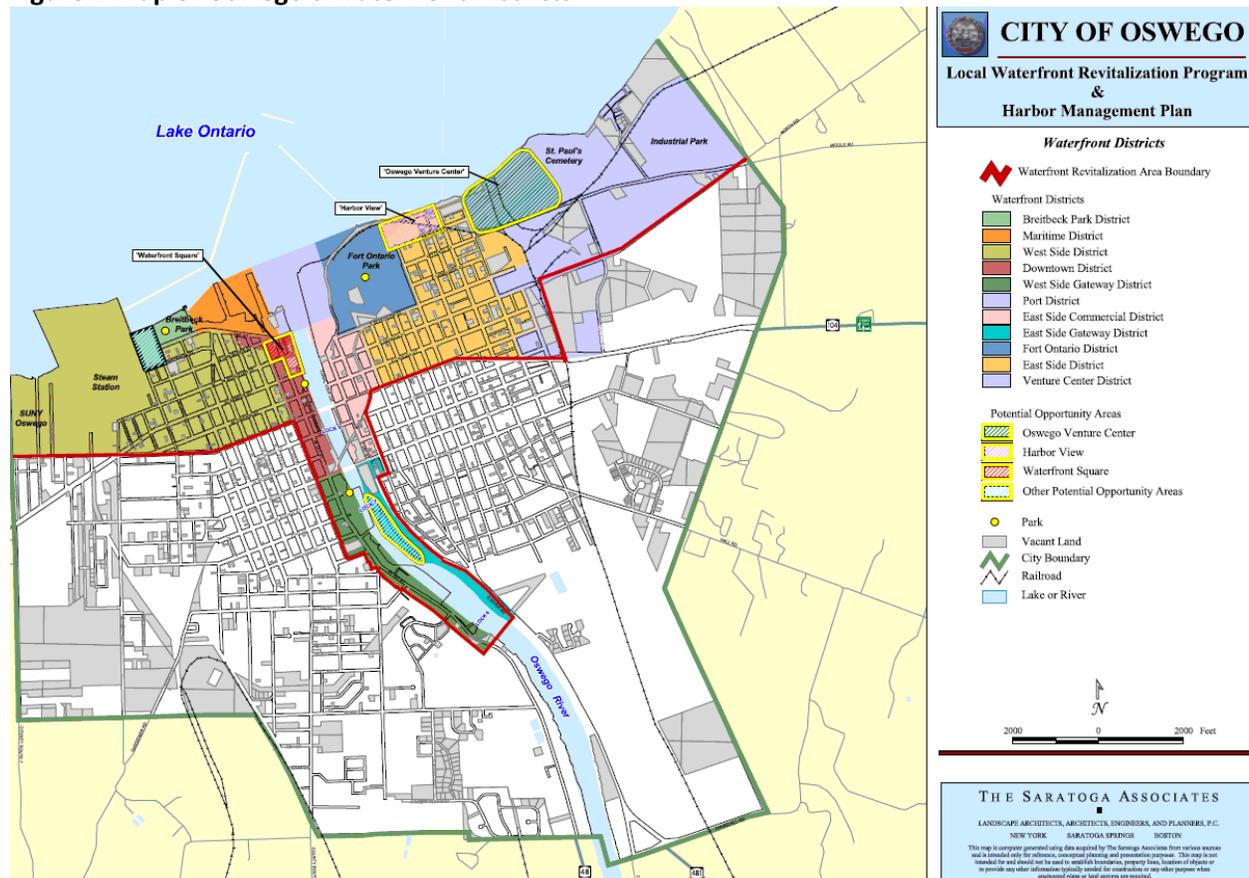
As a planning document prepared by the community, the LWRP provides a framework within which critical waterfront issues can be addressed. It indicates what local implementation measures (e.g., zoning/local laws, specific projects) are needed to revitalize the waterfront. The New York coastal program provided the technical and financial resources

to develop the LWRP. The city of Oswego was receptive to the LWRP because community leaders understood that developing a LWRP increased their ability to attract private and public resources to enhance their waterfronts.

As a program, the LWRP is the organizational structure, local laws, projects and on-going partnerships that implement the planning document. Approved by the New York Secretary of State and the U.S. Dept. of Commerce Office of Ocean and Coastal Resource Management (OCRM), part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the LWRP serves to coordinate state and federal actions needed to achieve the community’s goals for its waterfront.

The 2009 update to Oswego’s LWRP is under review. The updated plan will guide future redevelopment for 11 districts along the Oswego waterfront as depicted in Figure 1.

**Figure 1 Map of Oswego’s Waterfront Districts**



**State Resources to Revitalize Waterfronts**

Over the past fifteen years, the state of New York (NYS) has offered financial and technical assistance to local communities through a variety of programs. Oswego has utilized the following state programs to integrate smart growth into their planning processes and revitalize the city’s waterfront:

<i>NYS Dept. of State Local Waterfront Revitalization Program</i>	Funds a wide range of waterfront revitalization activities including park and marina development
<i>NYS Housing Trust Fund Office of Community Renewal and U.S Dept. of Housing and Urban Development Community Development Block Grant Program</i>	Supported the development of mixed land uses, affordable housing, economic development and waterfront revitalization initiatives in Oswego.
<i>NYS Canal Corporation Canal Revitalization Program</i>	Supported Oswego and surrounding communities revitalizing and providing public access to its waterways.
<i>NYS Office of Parks Recreation and Historic Preservation Environmental Protection Fund Program</i>	Supported waterfront revitalization and public access projects.
<i>NYS Dept. of Environmental Conservation</i>	Provided initial grant funding for sewer system enhancements in 1982 that improved fishing access as well as the West Side Esplanade along Oswego River above the new sewer line
<i>NYS Dept. of Transportation</i>	Provided financial support to construct the Harbor Rail Trail which connects the Oswego River with the Fort Ontario Historic Site, and in 2002 the construction of the Oswego Harbor Trail connecting the Oswego Riverwalk with the Lake Ontario attractions at Breitbeck Park and the Wright’s Landing Marina in 2008.
<i>NYS Historic Preservation Office</i>	Supported Oswego historic preservation activities in restoring the Oswego Library and the Oswego Armory for the YMCA Recreation Center for Oswego’s downtown waterfront.



Salmon Fishing in Oswego River

Source: City of Oswego

	Smart Growth Implementation	Comp Plan	Waterfront Plan	Public Will	Local Initiative	Local Regulation	State Regs/Program	Federal Program
1. Mixed land uses	✓	X	X				X	X
2. Compact building design								
3. Range of housing opportunities	✓				X		X	X
4. Walkable waterfronts & public access	✓	X	X		X		X	X
5. Distinctive, disaster-resilient communities	✓	X	X				X	
6. Preserve open space	✓	X	X				X	
7. Directed development & revitalization	✓	X	X		X		X	
8. Variety of transportation choices	✓						X	
9. Consistent polices & coordinated permitting	✓				X		X	
10. Stakeholder collaboration in decisions	✓	X	X					

**SMART GROWTH ELEMENTS**

The visionary 2020 comprehensive plan and the complementary LWRP provide a framework for the city of Oswego to continue the momentum of cleaning up the Area of Concern and revitalizing its waterfront and downtown consistent with smart growth principles that recognize and build on the community’s natural and cultural assets.

**Walkable Waterfront Leading Revitalization**

The city of Oswego is redeveloping its downtown by building on its waterfront heritage. The waterfront has been transformed from an eyesore into a beautiful river walk that attracts residents, tourists and anglers. The increased tourism has had a ripple effect, providing new customers for its downtown area.



Oswego Riverwalk  
Source: City of Oswego

Oswego has worked to convert neglected areas into a thriving mix of community parks, marinas and waterfront walkways. The city completed a mile-long walkway along the Oswego River; improvements to Wright’s Landing Marina; and additional public access and boating facilities with pedestrian connections to the pier and adjacent parks. At the same time, the city has connected the downtown with the waterfront and revitalized abandoned buildings.

Developed in the early 1980s and expanded in the 1990s, the Wright’s Landing Marina the marina accommodates 223 vessels with a variety of facilities including a pump-out station, boat hoist, picnic areas, restrooms and showers, and a fish cleaning station. From 2003-2009, Oswego expanded boater services with utility hook-ups (e.g., cable, water and electric) at the marina. In the near future, the city is exploring opportunities to provide docking and services to larger boats of 40 feet and greater.

Parks have been key in providing public access and establishing the Oswego waterfront as a destination. Breitbeck Park, H. Lee White Marine Museum, Fort Ontario State Historic Site and Montcalm Park provide many recreational opportunities, in addition to Wright’s Landing Marina and the East and West Riverwalks along the Oswego River.

Working with a wide variety of public and private partners, Oswego has realized its vision and is building on its success. Since the late 1980s, Oswego's public improvements have leveraged nearly \$16 million dollars in private investment, and new projects continue to spin off from the activity that surrounds the waterfront. Following are highlights of proposed projects that involve increasing public access, remedial cleanup and rehabilitation, port enhancements and park creation.

- The Oswego Canal Greenway Access Project will enhance the East Side Riverfront Walkway, bringing boaters more directly into Oswego's historic downtown and connecting the Oswego Canal Greenway to the Oswego Harbor Trail and the NY Scenic Byway, the Seaway Trail.
- Through the Oswego West Pierhead Lighthouse Project, the city will acquire the Oswego West Pierhead Lighthouse and provide remedial cleanup and rehabilitation to preserve this National Historic Site.
- The Port of Oswego Authority Connector Project will enhance port facilities to facilitate the international import of container ships without negatively impacting downtown Oswego.
- The Leotta Seaway Trail Gateway Park Project will transform a city owned parcel overlooking the Oswego Erie Canal Historic Site and at the east end of the Oswego Harbor Rail Trail bridge into a park featuring interpretive panels that describe Oswego's historic eras from the French & Indian War, the Abolitionist and Industrial era through the current Energy and Education based economic period.

### **Fostering a Strong Sense of Place**

Being at the intersection of Oswego Canal and Lake Ontario, the city of Oswego has developed a unique sense of place based on its coastal heritage. The *Oswego 2020 Vision Comprehensive Plan*

identifies specific actions to protect Oswego as a distinctive community:

- Enact development regulations that encourage the rehabilitation and protection of historic buildings.
- Enact local legislation to protect historic neighborhoods.

To advance these activities, an architectural survey was completed for the entire city. Based on the survey, two historic districts were established. The city developed downtown design guidelines to further protect architectural assets and enhance community character. An architectural review committee provides guidance to property owners for the preservation and improvement of building facades as well as infrastructure such as bridge replacements and land development for parks and parking lots.

In addition to establishing historic districts and design standards, the city has taken steps to redevelop abandoned buildings that are legacies of a manufacturing-based economy. City staff and officials worked closely with developers and other partners to rehabilitate a vacant, deteriorated 5-story brick commercial building in Oswego's historic district into retail, office and residential office space. Moreover, the city has created design ideas to redevelop the International Paper site into the Oswego Venture Center. The Center would offer educational, trade and industry opportunities to the socially and economically disadvantaged.



Source: NY DOS Division of Coastal Resources

Further fostering a strong sense of place, the city celebrates its unique coastal heritage by hosting a

variety of events throughout the year: Harborfest, Canal Splash and the Great Pumpkin Festival, to name a few. In late July, Harborfest brings in more than 250,000 people to Oswego for entertainment, arts and crafts, boating and fireworks show. In August, Oswego hosts events for the annual New York State Canal Splash. Activities include rowing regattas, kayak and canoe outings, musical performances and boat tours. October marks the Great Pumpkin Festival. Contestants truck their great pumpkins from all over New York State to weigh-in and compete. Oswego is known for great quantities of snow in winter and the Warm-Up Oswego Festival in February that brings arts, entertainment and fireworks to the Oswego River corridor.



Grand Finale at Harborfest, 2008  
Source: Jon R. Vermilye

### Mixed Land Uses

The city of Oswego promotes mixed land uses within its planning documents and programs. The *Oswego 2020 Vision Comprehensive Plan* identifies the following activities to facilitate the development of mixed land uses:

- Rezone the city based on the 2020 Vision Plan Land Use Map.
- Conduct a phase 2 investigation and remediation of several brownfield sites for the Waterfront Square mixed use development.
- Develop design guidelines to prohibit new single-use, single-story buildings within the downtown area.

As of 2009, the city is working on securing the funding to carry out these activities.

The draft 2008 update to the LWRP further encourages mixed land use in proposed

restoration, revitalization or redevelopment projects within the Waterfront Revitalization Area. These uses are designed to be compatible with tourism or the water related character of the area.

### Stakeholder Collaboration

Through the development of both the LWRP and the *Oswego 2020 Vision Comprehensive Plan*, the community and stakeholders have had significant involvement in creating the future vision of their city.

The city's comprehensive planning process provided the entire community opportunities to participate through community forums, design charrettes and focus groups. Focus group topics included transportation; economic development and tourism; natural resources and recreation; arts, education and community resources; and neighborhoods. The plan itself also emphasizes stakeholder collaboration through its core theme called "Empowerment". It states that, "Empowering people to take charge of their community's future is one way for Oswego to achieve 2020 vision"

In the LWRP development process, the city determined the best use of the waterfront through community focus groups and active stakeholder involvement in all stages of the planning and implementation process. The Oswego LWRP Advisory Committee includes elected officials, public agency and private industry representatives, members of private groups and individuals interested in the waterfront. It is responsible for ensuring public participation in the preparation of LWRP, developing broad-based support for the program and coordinating its implementation.

### MOVING FORWARD IN SUSTAINABILITY

Beyond smart growth, the city is demonstrating a commitment to broader principles of sustainability. A key example is the city's work to pursue cost-efficient, best management practices for its infrastructure. The Maxwell Study, *The City of Oswego: Toward Municipal Sustainability* has identified ways the city can save money on operating costs for its buildings and infrastructure while conserving energy. The city has secured

funding to include green initiatives and a sustainability plan in a revision of its *2020 Vision Comprehensive Plan* and has proposed to study the feasibility of Lake Source Cooling (LSC) in Oswego's established water districts. LSC is a means of utilizing the cool deep waters of lakes as air conditioning for buildings. LSC facilities currently operate at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York and in Toronto, Ontario. These facilities were both built to cool buildings and reduce their city's carbon footprint and energy costs.

## **BENEFITS**

With federal, state and private partnerships, Oswego's LWRP and 2020 Vision Comprehensive Plan has yielded many benefits, both environmental and socio-economic. This section identifies preliminary environment and socioeconomic indicators.

### **Economic Growth**

Directed development, revitalization projects and the promotion of mixed use development have spurred economic growth in Oswego. By leveraging state and federal funding for redeveloping commercial/residential downtown waterfront sites, the city's commercial vacancies rate declined from 72 percent in 1995 to 20 percent in 2005. Furthermore, the city's unemployment rate has decreased by almost half from 8.2 percent in 1990 to 4.7 percent in 2000.

Housing opportunities have increased in downtown Oswego. In the early 1980s, 200 senior apartments were built on the Oswego River

Corridor. Over the past 5 years (2003 to 2008), upper story downtown apartments have increased by 22 units, and current proposals include an additional 82 units to be available in 2010. Building conversions have provided an additional 48 apartments and 34 condos.

### **Public Access and Open Space**

Public access to the waterfront is the cornerstone to Oswego's revitalization efforts. The city has approximately six miles of waterfront: about half of which is along Lake Ontario and the other half is along the Oswego River. The city has completed 1.25 miles of recreational paths, providing public access to 20 percent of the total six miles of waterfront. Additionally, Oswego has approximately 89 acres of parks of which 29 acres or 33 percent were constructed since 1986.

### **Environmental Protection**

As noted in the introduction, public and private partnerships have led to the remediation, revitalization and redevelopment of the Oswego Harbor and River corridor. As a significant indicator of improved water quality, the Oswego River AOC became the first U.S. AOC to be removed from the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement list of Great Lakes Areas of Concern in June, 2006.

As the city continues to implement the projects and actions identified in its planning documents, a more robust set of smart growth indicators will need to be developed to track progress and perform trend analyses that can measure the benefits of existing and new projects.

## **REFERENCES**

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