New York Route 5 Corridor Land Use and Transportation Study

Issues Assessment

Prepared for
Capital District Transportation Committee

Prepared by
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with
Economic & Planning Systems
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March 15, 2000
Introduction

This report summarizes the findings of the NY5 consulting team in identifying key issues affecting the potential for land use, economic, and transportation investment along the Route 5 Corridor. The conclusions that follow were developed with guidance from two Study Advisory Committee (SAC) workshops and the Market and Transportation Assessments authored by Economic & Planning Systems (EPS) and Wilbur Smith Associates (WSA), respectively, as well as an assessment of existing land use patterns and policies by Community Design + Architecture (CD+A).

Based on the identified opportunities and constraints in the region and the Corridor, this report also develops a set of preliminary policy recommendations for guiding regional growth, improving the competitiveness of the NY5 Corridor and improving the quality of life for the neighborhoods which are a part of the Corridor.

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3 “NY 5 Corridor — Land Use Policies & Implementation Techniques Assessment.” Memorandum from Phil Erickson, AIA, Community Design + Architecture to NY5 Study Advisory Committee. February 2, 1999.
Background

Fifty years ago, the central cities of Albany, Schenectady, and Troy were the Region's primary employment and residential centers, and the Route 5 Corridor was the Region's main arterial, linking Albany and Schenectady. Since then, a number of land use and market trends have eroded the vitality of the central cities and the Corridor. The construction of the New York State Thruway and other limited access highways and the concurrent postwar housing boom turned Route 5 from a gateway to the one of the first American suburban auto “strips.” Today many existing developments reflect the desire for easy auto access, separation of differing land uses, and low initial infrastructure cost. At the same time, these economic and social forces also led to expansion of the region as a whole. First housing developments, then retail, and increasingly jobs have been moving out from the traditional regional urban cores of Albany and Schenectady to auto-oriented suburban areas such as the Town of Colonie and to areas in surrounding counties.

Yet, the Corridor remains centrally located in the Capital District and has excellent access to the state and regional circulation system. While outlying suburban areas have experienced increasing growth, a significant concentration of jobs and homes are present in the Corridor. This sets an economic context within public policy and public investment can encourage and direct revitalization of the Corridor.
Existing Conditions

Land Use

The Corridor in the Region

The NY5 Corridor study area extends 16.5 miles in a nearly straight line from Townsend Park in Albany to Nott Terrace in Schenectady. For this entire length it is a clearly defined mixed-use commercial corridor with relatively dense residential neighborhoods or employment clusters behind the commercial strip. Approximately 15% of the Capital District's households and 30% of the jobs are within 1/2 mile of Route 5 within the Corridor. This is a significant concentration of jobs and housing within a region that is perceived by many to be characterized by low density suburban and rural development. As a result, the Corridor has the potential to attract some key portions of development activity in the Capital District.
Urban Form

The Route 5 Corridor has been divided into seven analysis segments that reflect distinct characteristics of residential and commercial land development, as well as general roadway character – their Urban Typology.

Segment 1
Lark Street to Quail Street in Albany

The most urban portion of the Corridor consisting mainly of two-story and higher mixed-use buildings with ground floor retail or office space with higher density residential neighborhoods to the north and south of Central Avenue. This segment has densities characteristic of older urban corridors, with a mix of retail, residential, and civic uses. Structures are generally mid- and high-rise. There are numerous vacancies among the ground-floor retail and office spaces with some buildings and lots being completely vacant. The residential neighborhoods behind the mixed-use frontage have many vacant and deteriorated homes that contribute to the general malaise of the area. Some portions of the areas to the south have more investment, because of the adjacent parks and more historic and single-family character of the housing stock.

Segment 2
Quail Street to Watervliet Avenue in Albany

Lower intensity mixed-use buildings directly fronting Central Avenue with medium density neighborhoods on both sides of Central. Development densities drop fairly quickly as one moves west of Quail Street. Uses include a mix of retail, housing, and civic and governmental services. The majority of buildings are one- and two-story, with the major exception being the apartment tower just west of Ontario Street. The adjacent residential neighborhoods are more vital to the south of Central Avenue while those to the north are more similar to the neighborhoods in Segment 1.

Segment 3
Watervliet Avenue to Virginia Avenue in Albany, the Town of Colonie, and the Village of Colonie

The portion of the Corridor is characterized by suburban strip development oriented towards providing more regional retail and services with mainly single-family neighborhoods on either side of Central Avenue and some industrial or R & D -flex development to the south. This is the largest segment of the Corridor. It extends from the western portion of Albany through the Village of Colonie up to Virginia Avenue where the intensity of development drops further. This
The Suburban Strip  
Segment 4  
Virginia Avenue to Linda Lane in the Town of Colonie, Niskayuna, and Schenectady

Segment 5  
Linda Lane to Laurel Avenue in Schenectady
**Segment 6**
Laurel Avenue to Steuben Street in Schenectady

Intensities of development are generally higher than in Segment 5 with more buildings coming up to the street. Similar in character to Segment 2. The scale of development and character of State Street change markedly in this segment of the Corridor. There are very few parcels larger than a quarter acre and much of the development is residential in scale. Many one- and two-family homes front onto State Street, particularly from Dartmouth to Harvard Streets and Edward to Charles Streets. Several former houses have been remodeled into apartments and/or have ground floor commercial use. This segment also shows signs of a weak real estate market, with retail store vacancies and unmaintained stores and residences.

**Segment 7**
Steuben Street to Nott Terrace in Schenectady

This Corridor segment has higher urban densities, similar to those in Segment 1 at the Albany end of the Corridor. Building heights are generally two to five stories, while the scale of parcelization remains relatively small. Development includes a variety of residential uses, commercial use of variable economic viability, and some vacant buildings and surface parking lots. The majority of the buildings in this segment have no setback from the right-of-way, and the right-of-way itself narrows to only about 70 feet at Nott Terrace.
Market Assessment

The construction of limited access highways and suburbs, in essence the movement toward auto-oriented development, has been a mixed blessing for the Corridor. On the one hand commercial development such as “Auto Row,” in Albany, Colonie Center, and the New Karner area in the Village of Colonie have provided years of solid economic activity. Yet, automobiles have also allowed for the a shift in development activity to other areas in the Capital District, diminishing the economic strength and the quality of life in neighborhoods in other parts of the Corridor. Key trends which have led to the Corridor’s decline include:

- The construction of the Interstates and other arterials, permissive land use policies and planning efforts, and the availability of easily developed vacant land have catalyzed development in suburban locations outside of the central cities and the Corridor.
- The fragmented ownership patterns and the aging of buildings along the Corridor have created impediments to reinvestment and the attraction of a new generation of tenants and users.
- The low population and economic growth in the region related to industrial sector downsizing and other factors have resulted in insufficient market support for both new suburban development and existing development on and close to the Corridor. The outcome has been significant changes to business activity on the Corridor.
- The suburbanization of development has also eroded the vitality of the central cities, one of which, Schenectady, has also struggled due to the major layoffs by its largest employer, General Electric. This has further diminished the regional significance of the Corridor.

A total of about 430,500 persons are currently employed in the Capital Region’s MSA. Employment increased by 2,200 jobs per annum over the last nine years, equivalent to an annual average growth rate of 0.5 percent. A Department of Labor survey of employers concerning projected labor requirements indicates an average annual employment growth rate of about 0.6 percent between 1996 and 2006. This implies the continuation of the historical trend of gradual employment growth in the region.

The Corridor has experienced a shift from the higher paying state government and manufacturing sectors to the—on average—lower paying service sector. Changes in payroll drive changes in household income, which, in turn, affect household expenditures on goods and services. A continuation of the recent employment trends by sector imply a limited increase in regional payroll in the future, and, as a result, a limited increase in retail expenditures.

The regional economy consists of a number of inter-related industry sectors. The sections below summarize the historical growth trends in each of these sectors and present an assessment of their future growth potential and expected employment needs by occupation.
Government
The government sector, which includes federal, state, and local, has a strong presence in the Capital District, insulating the region from the impact of business cycles. The government sector currently provides about 108,600 jobs—over 25 percent of the MSA's employment. Of this, 50 percent is state, 42 percent is local, and 8 percent is federal. Government employment decreased by about 1,800 jobs over the last nine years, with significant losses in state and federal employment counterbalancing gains in local government employment. Future employment growth in the government sector is expected to be limited. Still, government employment is likely to have an effect on Corridor land use patterns because of the State's commitment to shift jobs to the downtowns of the region.

Manufacturing
The region's manufacturing base, in line with national trends, has declined significantly over the last thirty years. Employment in the manufacturing sector fell from 47,200 persons in 1988 to 38,800 in 1997. Contractions in the region's largest manufacturing company, General Electric', have driven this overall reduction in employment. As General Electric's production has contracted some new, smaller niche-manufacturers have increased their activity in the region, employment in the manufacturing sector is expected to stabilize.
Service
The significance of the service sector to the region’s economy has grown steadily over the last twenty years, counterbalancing contractions in both the government and manufacturing sectors, and driving the region’s moderate growth. In 1990, the service sector overtook the public sector as the largest provider of jobs and currently provides 133,200 jobs. Between 1988 and 1997, the service sector added about 29,000 jobs, equivalent to about 3,200 jobs each year, or an average annual growth rate of 2.7 percent. The importance of the service sector is expected to continue into the future, adding the majority of new jobs in the region.

Trade
The trade sector, including retail and wholesale, currently provides about 92,000 jobs, or about 21 percent of the region's employment. Of this, about 80 percent is retail and 20 percent wholesale employment. Employment in the trade sector increased by 3,700 jobs, or 0.5 percent per annum, over the last nine years, with retail sector gains counterbalancing a minor contraction in the wholesale sector. This gradual employment growth, however, hides a number of significant structural changes in the retail sector, including increased retail sales relative to persons employed, the increased market area served by a number of the newer and larger retail formats, and the growing saturation of the region’s retail market.

Other
Other sectors include finance, insurance and real estate (FIRE), transportation and public utilities (TPU), and construction. Currently, these sectors provide about 57,300 jobs, equaling 13 percent of regional employment. Growth in FIRE and TPU has been gradual, in line with overall employment growth, while construction employment has contracted. Projected growth in these sectors is expected to be small but positive, consistent with overall regional employment growth.

Policies and Techniques Assessment
Community Design + Architecture examined the existing land use policies and implementation tools employed by the five jurisdictions which make up the Route 5 Corridor.

At the regional level, the Capital District does not have an established program of regional land use planning. However, in addition to achieving regional consensus on a multi-modal transportation policy, New Visions, the long range regional transportation plan examined the interrelationship between transportation and future regional growth and land use patterns, economic development, and other urban issues.

At the jurisdictional level, the communities which have very little vacant land, namely, Albany, the Village of Colonie, and Schenectady rely heavily on their zoning ordinances to guide future development. The City of Schenectady has a 1971 Comprehensive Plan which is out of date and does not reflect current economic development strategies and state or federal policies. In this case, the lack of a comprehensive vision is integral with the lack of coordination between various programs in the community. A similar set of coordination issues face Albany as well.
The Town of Colonie has published a Land Use Management Program, establishing a set of goals, policies and priorities to shape the future development of the Town. Yet, the Town, like the Village of Colonie and to a lesser extent the remaining jurisdictions, relies upon zoning codes which are not sufficient to guide real-estate market forces and therefore to implement all the objectives of the Management Program. In both the Town and Village of Colonie, business and commercial districts allow a broad range of land uses over an extensive land area which does not maintain and reinforce established retail centers as the primary business, personal service and shopping areas within the jurisdictions. Furthermore, maximum allowable densities, intensities of development, and fractured land use patterns do not support mass transit or encourage other alternative modes of transportation in these jurisdictions. More and better comprehensive planning is needed to dovetail real estate market forces with public policy and prevent development patterns which ultimately diminish the quality of life in the Corridor communities.

The level of detail and flexibility of each community's zoning ordinances varies greatly. Albany's is one of the more detailed and comprehensive in the Corridor, while the Town of Colonie relies more upon discretionary review to manage nonresidential development. The table on the following page summarizes the policy tools in place in each of the five jurisdictions.

Finally, none of the communities have urban design or architectural standards or guidelines to provide direction for the quality of the built environment, with the exception of some standards for historic neighborhoods. While Niskayuna has used its Planned Development District ordinance and special review to a similar effect for the Niskayuna Square Shopping Center, this discretionary review can have inconsistent results. Design standards and guidelines are needed to preserve (and improve) quality of life within these communities.

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4 New York State Department of Labor, Occupational Outlook — Capital Region.
5 Other projections imply a lower growth rate for the Region. For example, the Bureau of Economic Analysis projected average annual employment growth of 0.18 percent for the Albany-Schenectady-Troy MSA between 1995 and 2020.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jurisdiction</th>
<th>Land Use Planning</th>
<th>Zoning</th>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Maximum Densities</th>
<th>Design Guidelines</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City of Albany</td>
<td>No Comprehensive Plan; Ongoing focus on maintenance and revitalization</td>
<td>Detailed and comprehensive</td>
<td>10 residential</td>
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<td>Some discretionary review</td>
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<td>Town of Colonie</td>
<td>1998 Land Use Management Program</td>
<td>Fine-grained for housing, flexible for commercial, relies on discretion review</td>
<td>5 SF residential</td>
<td>SF 0.4-4.5 du/ac</td>
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<td>Zoning does not support some goals in Management Plan</td>
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<td>MF 5-7 du/ac</td>
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<td>Village of Colonie</td>
<td>No Comprehensive Plan, does not help to guide real estate market forces</td>
<td>Reflective of small size and lack of vacant land</td>
<td>4 residential</td>
<td>SF 0.4-4.5 du/ac</td>
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<td>3 commercial</td>
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<td>Conservation Res. Dist. (CRD) designates environmentally sensitive areas</td>
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<td>Some discretionary review</td>
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<td>Town of Niskayuna</td>
<td>1994 Comprehensive Plan used but not adopted recognizes and reinforces the hierarchy of uses within the community</td>
<td>Planned Unit and Planned Development Districts (PUD and PDD) provide additional flexibility in uses, parking reqs</td>
<td>5 residential</td>
<td>0.5-10 du/acre</td>
<td>Some guidelines directed at architectural design but limited in relation to urban form</td>
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<td>4 commercial</td>
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<td>Some discretionary review</td>
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<td>City of Schenectady</td>
<td>1971 Comprehensive Plan, does not reflect current economic and zoning policies</td>
<td>Reflects lack of vacant land</td>
<td>5 residential</td>
<td>SF 7 and 14 du/ac</td>
<td>No Design Guidelines</td>
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<td>On-going focus on maintenance and revitalization</td>
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<td>5 commercial</td>
<td>MF 16 du/acre</td>
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<td>Metropolitan Authority provides the opportunity for funding of long range visioning and capital improvements</td>
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<td>3 special purpose</td>
<td>6.5 FAR in CBD Overlay</td>
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<td>2 recreation</td>
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Other Tools
The Corridor Communities use a variety of other policies and implementation tools to shape their communities. These range from fairly typical special permitting and site plan review to business improvement districts. All of the Corridor Communities use some type of discretionary review—site review, special use permitting, etc.—some more effectively than others. A major problem with discretionary review is that it is discretionary, and it relies upon the skills of staff and elected officials to ensure consistency and to strike a bargain every time a project is approved. The process and its built results can be inconsistent and ineffective to the dismay of property owners, developers, and the public. Special public entities are needed to organize the community, define strategies, gather and channel funds, and implement projects. Two programs in particular stand out as potential leaders in revitalization of the Corridor.

The Metroplex Authority was established for the purpose of economic development and revitalization of the Route 5 and Route 7 corridors. The Authority holds great promise in successfully attracting public and private commitments to reinvest in Schenectady, but its potential application at a city-wide level has been largely misunderstood. The legislation which created Metroplex defines its service district to cover a broad area of Schenectady and Scotia (about 3 square miles), an area extending down the Route 5 Corridor to the county line with a width of 3,500 feet, and another area out Route 7 to the Schoharie County line. Yet, to date Metroplex publicity and planning efforts have focused on planning for the downtown. Furthermore, this service district excludes all property which includes a “non-multiple dwelling residence.” It remains unclear to what extent the Metroplex Authority can assist in the implementation of the concepts that come out of this Study, particularly to the extent that the recommendations of this Study include revitalization of the residential neighborhoods that abut State Street.

The Central Avenue BID is currently working with a team of consultants to define programs and strategies for revitalizing Albany’s portion of the Corridor. Already the BID has had a visual impact on the Avenue with its clean-up crews and various efforts focused on the holiday seasons, and its role in encouraging and guiding new business locations is proving effective. The BID can be both an organizing and implementing tool for strategies that are developed to revitalize the Corridor.

Airport and GEIS Mitigation Fees and TDM. It is also possible to provide for improvements to the transportation system using policies that reflect the impacts of development. The Town of Colonie has one of the most effective systems in the region. The Town of Colonie’s Airport recently conducted a Final Generic Environmental Impact Statement (FGES). The study area for the FGES touches portions of Route 5 in two locations: the first around Colonie Center; and the second around the New Karner Road/Central Avenue intersection. The Findings Statement of the GEIS instituted a mechanism for the imposition of mitigation fees assessed against new development related to infrastructure needs, including transportation system improvements. Transportation projects to be partially funded by these locally generated mitigation fees include roadway improvements (such as adding turn lanes, sidewalks, and travel lanes), transportation demand management (TDM) activities and transit.
Transportation

As a principal arterial within New York State’s roadway classification system, Route 5 serves a range of functions, from providing mobility between the urban centers of Albany and Schenectady, to offering accessibility to adjoining properties throughout the Corridor. The roadway also serves a wide variety of vehicle types and trip patterns including a large volume of work trips - by car and by transit bus - to the traditional downtown cores, as well as numerous suburban office and retail centers; shopping trips to the Colonie Center and many other shopping plazas, urban shopping districts and free-standing stores; and truck trips to destinations on the Corridor and to truck terminals located in close proximity, particularly in the Town of Colonie, between Old Karner Road and Cordell Road.

The Route is characterized by multiple driveways and signalized intersections, few secondary streets and little connectivity between the commercial area and surrounding residences and community facilities. By its uncoordinated nature, the conventional pattern of development limits the ability to strategically widen roads, to modify circulation patterns or to provide turn lanes at intersections. Over time the proliferation of individual driveways along an arterial without access control fosters a chaotic and unappealing roadside vista. Automobile congestion along Route 5 increases each year, while this intensity of development has also made Route 5 the highest demand transit corridor - by a factor of two - in the Capital Region.

Roadway Characteristics

The width of right-of-way in the Corridor is relatively constrained for its function and adjacent uses. This limits capacity expansion and alternatives for improving the multi-modal utility of the street.

Paved roadway width in the Route 5 Corridor varies between 50 feet (including on-street parking lanes) and 112 feet (including right and left turn lanes). The most typical pavement width is 62 feet, with a center left turn lane, and no on-street parking. End-to-end travel for the 16.5-mile Route 5 Corridor takes approximately 36 minutes during the off-peak (midday) period and approximately 40 minutes during the morning and evening peak periods. There are 61 traffic signals located within the defined Route 5 Corridor. In the Town and Village of Colonie and the Town of Niskayuna, traffic signals are located at a frequency of 1,000 to 1,500 feet.

Both the eastern and western ends of the Route 5 Corridor have on-street parking. Based on limited field observations, parking availability in both the Albany and Schenectady study segments appears to be a moderate constraint on the ability of these areas to attract and retain retail businesses. The lack of off-street parking for some residences fronting on State Street may also be a factor affecting their resale value. Off-street parking is provided by all retail and residential properties outside the urban cores, as required by local zoning ordinances. This parking appears to be generally adequate to meet existing levels of demand.
Traffic Characteristics

Corridor traffic is relatively balanced between the three peak hours - morning, midday and evening. A pronounced directionality to the traffic flow does exist in some locations, although in some places peak direction flows are equivalent in either direction. In general, the evening peak hour is the busiest of the three. Hourly, bidirectional traffic volumes range from a high of 3,000 vehicles (in both the midday and evening peak hours) in the vicinity of Colonie Center to a low of 600-700 vehicles in the section of State Street west of the Route 7 Interchange. The evening peak hour is typically the most congested period in the Route 5 Corridor, with many of the high volume intersections operating at a volume/capacity ratio of 0.9 or higher. Volume/capacity ratios in this range are characterized as providing level of service D, which is typical in heavily congested suburban corridors and in urban areas.

A lower number of accidents occur at intersections within the city portions of the Route 5 study area than within the NYSDOT-operated portions of the Corridor in the Town and Village of Colonie and the Town of Niskayuna. This is likely the result of greater traffic volumes on both Route 5 and the intersecting roadways and driveways in the non-city segments, and also due to lower traffic speeds in the urban areas.1

Truck Traffic

Like any commercial corridor, NY5 also supports light and heavy truck traffic serving both as a connector to the interstate highways and as a conduit between the Corridor communities, especially Albany and Schenectady. Producers and distributors, primarily along the urban and suburban strip will benefit from clear, direct and easily managed connections to the Interstates. Street design, parking and land uses should be planned with these connections, and their importance to regional competitiveness, in mind.

Traffic along Route 5 itself, especially in the urban cores, may also be constrained by delivery activity. In Albany, alleys and sidestreets are available though not necessarily utilized for loading and unloading. In Schenectady, where few alleys for loading and unloading exist, side streets may need to be reconfigured to encourage businesses to utilize access for deliveries. Though it is not clear to what extent truck loading and unloading in hinders traffic flow in the urban cores (due to entry/exit, double-parking, delivery-activity, etc.) facilitating and encouraging the use of sidestreets and alleys, especially during peak commute hours will improve the capacity of the Route 5 Corridor.

1 Level of Service is a method for describing the level of congestion on a road segment or intersection. A “grade” is given, like on a report card, with an “A” describing a free flowing situation and “F” describing unacceptable delay.
Transit Characteristics

The Capital District Transportation Authority (CDTA) manages bus service for the Route 5 Corridor. Currently the only other mode of public transit that parallels the Corridor is the Amtrak connection between Albany-Rensselaer and Schenectady.

The CDTA's most heavily utilized bus route (Route 55) runs between Albany and Schenectady on NY5. April 1998 passenger counts indicate that 4,456 daily trips (one-way) are made on this route, with an additional 2,500 trips on nearby Routes 1 and 2, which travels west on Central Avenue and then northward onto Wolf Road. The CDTA indicates that seasonal increases can bring the daily ridership of Route 55 up to approximately 6,000, with peak ridership occurring during the pre-Christmas shopping season. Route 55 passengers represent more than 20 percent of total CDTA system ridership. Also, Route 55X provides limited commute express service between Albany and Schenectady during the week.

The CDTA's recent schedule modifications and the implementation of the Route 5 Traffic Signals Bus Priority Treatment Study recommendations will continue to improve transit service along the Corridor.

In addition to Route 55, most portions of State Street in Schenectady are served by CDTA bus routes 50, 53 and 62. Excluding the 55, these route together have an average daily ridership of approximately 450 passengers.

Pedestrian and Bicycle Travel Characteristics

Pedestrian volumes are much higher in the downtown Albany portion of the Corridor, and then drop-off in the more suburban portions of the city, as well as within the Town and Village of Colonie and the Town of Niskayuna. Pedestrian activity increases towards Downtown Schenectady. For most of the Route 5 Corridor study area, pedestrian circulation is constrained due to a lack of adequate crosswalks and limited pedestrian signalization at intersections; the frequency, number and in some places the length of curb cuts; and the extensive pavement width which pedestrians must cross. Sidewalks exist on either side of Route 5 throughout the Corridor, with some breaks in continuity due to excessive curb cuts (i.e., Auto Row in Albany. The pedestrian environments could be improved by adding street parking and street trees to act as buffers between the sidewalk and the road. Recent sidewalk construction in the Village of Colonie has helped to improve pedestrian access, though again minimal separation from traffic results in a degraded pedestrian environment. Albany has consistent and adequate sidewalk access through the core, while conditions vary in Schenectady. While the pedestrian environment may not be all that it could be, sidewalk access as a whole along Route 5 is above the regional norm for major arterial roads.
Relatively narrow traffic lanes and high traffic speeds make for a bicycle-unfriendly character for most of the Corridor. State Bike Route 5 traverses a portion of the Corridor from Brandywine Avenue west into downtown Schenectady. The majority of the bike route parallels the NY5 Corridor using Western Avenue in Albany and Route 146 in Guilderland.

Other Studies

The Albany Urban Corridor Study, has been undertaken for the Washington and Western Avenue corridors which parallel Route 5 in Albany. It has identified the low cost of parking for State employees and for SUNY staff and students as an important factor in determining the modal choice between autos and transit. The study set forth the following objectives for the Western Avenue Corridor.

- Create an efficient network of transit in the Corridor;
- Create parking solutions which alleviate current management issues;
- Establish a planning and urban design policy framework which supports an integrated approach to parking, transit and urban development;
- Strengthen the urban identity of the Washington and Western Avenue corridors;
- Encourage an environment which supports a balance between modes of travel; and
- Enhance the livability and character of Albany.

Some of the strategies for achieving these goals and objectives include:
- Building upon residential neighborhoods;
- Encouraging nodes of activity;
- Zones of reinvestment, such as the Harriman Campus, the Crossgates Mall and the Alumnae Quad;
- Establish community gateways; and
- Greening the Corridor.
- Other studies in the region support the movement toward improved infrastructure and frequency of service for transit along the Corridor. Together, the studies identify the following issues in the Corridor:
  - Need for improved transit amenities such as bus stops, pull outs, and park and ride facilities.
  - Improved transit centers and infrastructure. Exploration of Commuter Rail and Light Rail options between the corridor nodes, Albany and Schenectady.
Projected Trends

Land Use

Urban Form

Given existing land use policies one can expect the Corridor to change incrementally. The urban portions of the Corridor will continue to struggle to stabilize existing businesses and adjacent residential neighborhoods with some potential for success. The potential for the suburbanization of these portions of the Corridor exists, as illustrated by the drug store projects in Schenectady near the intersection with Brandywine. The more suburban portions of the Corridor will continue to "churn" auto-oriented retail and service uses with increasing influence from national and regional chains and the ever changing trends of the retail market. These trends are supported by the generally laissez faire policies and programs of the Corridor's communities.

Incremental decline of the Corridor is linked to the continued shift of jobs and housing to the outlying areas of the Capital District. Policies and programs need to be developed that provide a clear vision for the future of the Corridor. A vital and attractive center to the Capital District will help improve quality of life in the region while making it more competitive.

Market Forecast

As described above, the Corridor has been weakened by competition with new suburban development. Low projected growth in the region implies continued competition for new development between established areas, including the central cities and the Corridor, and suburban locations. Based on current development patterns, land availability, land costs, and prevalent development practices, suburban development will continue to dominate in the absence of public policies that aid the established areas. If current policies and development trends continue, suburban residential, office, and retail development will continue to weaken the vitality of the Corridor's commercial areas and residential neighborhoods.

The region has some important assets that could be capitalized on and some important public policy decisions have been taken. However, as discussed below, these assets and decisions alone are not sufficient to prevent the decline of the Corridor.

- High densities of population and employment are still concentrated along or close to the Corridor, and a number of neighborhoods along the Corridor are still strong. However, further erosion of the Corridor's vitality will continue to weaken the existing neighborhoods and make revitalization more difficult.
Albany and Schenectady have a number of assets including traditional urban forms and building types, a high level of transit service, historic districts, and other cultural amenities that have the potential to support vibrant and affordable urban neighborhoods. While these assets generate some appeal, they alone are not sufficient to maintain the vibrancy of the central cities, which in turn affects the strength of the Corridor.

The Town and Village of Colonie have high quality and affordable residential neighborhoods within the Corridor. However, the neighborhoods are not well served by commercial development along the Corridor and suffer from the negative impacts of the regional traffic congestion that exists within the Corridor.

Growth in high-tech business services, such as computer programming, aided by public/private efforts such as the Software Alliance, will provide high-paying jobs to some highly skilled workers. These efforts, however, are unlikely to transform the region into a high-growth economy and much of the high-tech development is outside the Corridor.

The region is well positioned for distribution type uses, although it faces competition from neighboring regions. To date, market forces have not generated significant growth in this sector to affect the larger regional economy.

A number of the region's shopping centers, Crossgates Mall in particular, are highly competitive, capturing retail expenditures from outside the region. Expansions of these centers and the construction of new centers will provide a number of relatively low-paying retail sector jobs. They are also, however, likely to weaken the strength of the region's other shopping centers and may themselves be threatened by the development of new super-regional centers in neighboring regions.

National retail trends towards entertainment and "main street" types of shopping do not have a strong presence to date in the Capital District. One exception is the revitalization of Saratoga Springs' downtown, which has been facilitated by the tourist focus in its local economy. Still, the inclusion of entertainment uses in the Crossgates and the Mohawk Mall proposals indicate a potential shift in the retail market, as do plans for an entertainment district in downtown Albany. The extent to which the Corridor could capitalize on this trend is unclear, but it does indicate potential support for some mixed-use and pedestrian-oriented nodes.

The decision to move State workers to central city downtowns, including downtown Albany and Schenectady, will help ensure a continued daytime presence of workers. This will not, however, ensure the strength of the residential neighborhoods and the viability of after-work eating, drinking, and entertainment options that play an important role in creating downtown vitality. In addition, the resulting availability of the State Office Campus for
private development is likely to decrease the viability of new office development along the Corridor.

- Similarly, the Metroplex Authority has the potential to simulate revitalization of Schenectady's downtown, as well as the Route 5 and Route 7 Corridors. However, it is unclear what benefits would accrue to the Corridor and the residential neighborhoods of Schenectady from some of the development concepts that are being considered for the downtown. The Route 5 Corridor Study has the potential to influence Metroplex policies in relation to the Corridor.

Transportation

Traffic

Projections developed as part of New Visions suggest that by year 2000 regional traffic volumes will have increased at a rate of 2.4% per year, nearly two times that of population and employment growth. The baseline forecast from year 2000 to 2015 indicates an annual regional growth rate of 1.1 percent per year.

Along the Route 5 Corridor, the Annual Average Daily Traffic (AADT) through the Corridor is expected to increase from 22,200 in 1990 to 23,400 in 2015, a 4.6% increase. Peak volumes will increase most in Schenectady between Route 146 and Steuben Street. Table 4.1 below shows that the corridor presently faces a wide range of traffic conditions (AADT is one measure of this). Without policy adjustments, the Corridor overall should expect to see relatively flat or modest population and employment growth over the next 20 years.

Table 4.1: Route 5 Traffic Volumes 1996 and 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seg</th>
<th>From</th>
<th>To</th>
<th>Jurisdiction</th>
<th>1996 AADT</th>
<th>2015 AADT*</th>
<th>% increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Lark St.</td>
<td>Clinton Ave.</td>
<td>Albany</td>
<td>13,900</td>
<td>14,600</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Clinton Ave.</td>
<td>Watervliet Ave.</td>
<td>Albany</td>
<td>22,000</td>
<td>23,300</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Watervliet Ave.</td>
<td>Colvin Ave.</td>
<td>Albany</td>
<td>29,000</td>
<td>29,400</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Colvin Ave.</td>
<td>Osborne Road</td>
<td>Albany</td>
<td>26,200</td>
<td>26,200</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Osborne Road</td>
<td>Wolf Road/I-87</td>
<td>Colonie</td>
<td>33,700</td>
<td>36,400</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I-87 Interchange</td>
<td>New Karner Rd.</td>
<td>Colonie</td>
<td>41,200</td>
<td>41,600</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>New Karner Rd.</td>
<td>Lisha Kill Rd.</td>
<td>Colonie</td>
<td>22,900</td>
<td>24,300</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Lisha Kill Road</td>
<td>Balltown Rd.</td>
<td>Niskayuna</td>
<td>22,900</td>
<td>24,500</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Balltown Road</td>
<td>Rt. 7 On-Ramp</td>
<td>Schenectady</td>
<td>15,300</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Rt. 7 On-Ramp</td>
<td>Rt. 146</td>
<td>Schenectady</td>
<td>13,400</td>
<td>15,300</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Rt. 146</td>
<td>Steuben Street</td>
<td>Schenectady</td>
<td>13,400</td>
<td>15,300</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Steuben Street</td>
<td>Nott Terrace</td>
<td>Schenectady</td>
<td>12,600</td>
<td>13,400</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Transit

Between 1997 and 2000, virtually the entire CDTA bus fleet has been replaced with new low-floor vehicles being deployed on all routes including those serving the Route 5 Corridor. Another major planned transit investment in this Corridor has been termed the “Best Bus” alternative, which includes improved transfer points, passenger waiting areas, scheduling, traveler information, improved bus priority signal control and other uses of technology, as recommended by the current Route 5 Traffic Signal Bus Priority Treatment Study.

All of the Route 55 buses will be equipped with Global Positioning System/Automatic Vehicle Location (GPS-AVL) systems by 2001. The implementation of the AVL system will allow CDTA to display “real time” information on bus locations at selected transit stops.

The Capital Region’s Regional Enterprise for a Vital Economy and Sustainable Transportation (REVEST) initiative has recommended a total of $136 million in Capital Region transportation improvements. Three of the seven REVEST elements (representing $57 million) are relevant to the Route 5 Corridor. The largest of these is the $48 million replacement of the Rensselaer Amtrak station. The station, which is the 10th busiest in the nation, will likely influence travel patterns between nearby Albany and Schenectady, the next stop on the rail line. In Schenectady, the on-going design of an intermodal transit center to accommodate Amtrak, commuter rail, local and intercity buses and parking around the existing Amtrak station is another REVEST recommended project. The third relevant project is the commuter rail demonstration project which will run from Saratoga Springs through Schenectady to Albany. REVEST is also coordinating with the State’s high-speed rail initiative to provide double tracking from Rensselaer to Schenectady. Double tracking will substantially reduce delays which exist between the two stations and allowing for full 110 m.p.h. operation.
Potential Policy Directions

The key public policy decisions that will be further defined during the remainder of the Study can be highlighted by a review of current land use policies and implementation techniques being used by Corridor communities.

Comprehensive Planning

Assessment: Only two of the communities in the Corridor, Niskayuna and the Town of Colonie, have up-to-date Comprehensive Plans. While the other three are mostly built-out and are therefore “mature” communities, they suffer to some degree from a lack of clear, inclusive, and complete vision for their communities’ land use and transportation future.

Recommendation: There are several steps that can be taken to improve the quality and effectiveness of community planning in the Corridor Communities which will clarify and reinforce the role of the Route 5 Corridor.

- At a minimum, for this Study, there needs to be a clear understanding of how each community sees the Corridor functioning in the broad fabric of their community. The questions to be asked are: What balance should be struck between regional and local serving uses? How should the Corridor function in the transportation system to strike a balance between local traffic, commuter traffic, transit, and truck traffic? Is there a need or desire to have more residential or employment uses directly on the Corridor?
- The Corridor Communities also need to determine how they relate to each other. Localities should attempt to coordinate their Comprehensive Plans in order to develop complementary, rather than conflicting or competing, objectives.
- Those communities that do not have current Comprehensive Plans should undertake a public community visioning process to clarify the long term goals for their community.
- Each community should monitor its performance in achieving the goals of its community vision.

Zoning Codes

Assessment: Some Corridor Communities define zoning districts and map them in a way that creates a coherent node of activity, an employment or retail district, or a residential neighborhood. However, in many other cases, the definition of zoning districts is overly broad in terms of allowable land uses. This is a particular problem in several of the commercial and business designations along the Corridor. Also, some communities have more land with a commercial designation than the market can support. These two factors have led to an incoherent land use pattern and an oversupply of retail use throughout the Corridor and region, creating difficulties for revitalization, new development, and transit development.
**Recommendations:** Land use planning in the Corridor should be more disciplined.

- Designate land use patterns and intensities that can be supported by expected market conditions, and that take advantage of location and existing successful land use patterns.
- Create a hierarchy of commercial land uses and use them to encourage a coherent pattern of centers and districts.
- Create design standards and guidelines if urban design and architectural character considerations are important to a community’s quality of life.

**Other Policies and Implementation Tools**

The Corridor Communities use a variety of other policies and implementation tools to shape their environments, including discretionary review, the creation of special public entities, and the development of Public/Private Partnerships.

**Discretionary Review**

**Assessment:** All of the Corridor Communities use some type of discretionary review—site review, special use permitting, etc.—some more effectively than others. A major problem with discretionary review is that it is discretionary, and it relies upon the skills of staff and elected officials to ensure consistency and to strike a bargain every time a new project is proposed. The process and its built results can be inconsistent and ineffective to the dismay of property owners, developers, and the public.

**Recommendation:** To improve predictability and clarify community desires establish design standards or guidelines and minimize the use of discretionary review.

**Special Public Entities**

**Assessment:** The Central Avenue BID and Metroplex are examples of special public entities that can serve to organize the community, define strategies, gather and channel funds, and implement projects.

**Recommendations:** The use of similar public entities in individual communities or a Corridor-wide entity should be considered in this Study.

**Public/Private Partnerships**

**Assessment:** The Central Avenue BID and the Urban League’s Arbor Hill project are examples of public/private partnerships that can improve quality of life in the community.

**Recommendation:** Explore ways to encourage public and private partnerships to achieve community goals more efficiently, and to the greatest extent possible get community organizations and non-profit developers involved in the implementation of this Study’s recommended future for the Corridor.
Policy Options For The Corridor

The revitalization of the Corridor requires strong public policy decisions that encourage the location of new, enduring development types on the Corridor. Without these policies, the Corridor will continue to decline. Public policy decisions depend on political will and support. A plan for Corridor revitalization could take one of three forms. The first, more comprehensive plan would require multi-jurisdictional cooperation at a regional level, the second, more modest plan would require concerted efforts on the part of individual jurisdictions, and the third plan would be a compromise between the other two alternatives in which the five Corridor Communities would cooperate in creating public policies to support the revitalization of the Corridor.

Regional Planning

A multi-jurisdictional regional planning effort would lead towards a set of public policies to direct new development away from undeveloped areas and towards the central cities, the Corridor, and established suburban communities. This effort would require the support of all local jurisdictions and, if implemented, could have a significant impact on the future of the Corridor and the central cities, as well as urban form of the entire Capital District. These policies would be combined with design guidelines and other development controls that would encourage viable, long-term community supporting uses. This would allow the Corridor to maintain vitality over time without the need for significant revitalization efforts every few years.

Individual Community Planning

Plans by individual communities would involve each jurisdiction identifying opportunity sites on the Corridor. Land use policies and design guidelines would then be used to encourage new development at these sites that (1) would act to strengthen adjacent uses by capitalizing on synergies and providing pleasant environments and building types, and (2) would likely be viable over time, minimizing the risk of obsolescence in the near future. This approach to Corridor revitalization would be incremental in nature, seeking to capitalize on the availability of market opportunities at sites that are currently available and other sites that become available over time. Suburban areas would continue to capture the majority of new development, and public policy would seek to maximize market opportunities on the Corridor as they arise. These incremental efforts would help improve the nature of development along the Corridor.

These planning efforts could be encouraged by the CDTC, CDTA, and CDRPC by directing
regional investments towards communities that are implementing “Smart Growth” policies, such as pedestrian- and transit-friendly development and infill strategies that maximize the use of existing infrastructure.

Corridor Planning

This alternative would be a compromise between full regional planning and incremental community planning. The five communities in the Corridor would cooperate in their efforts to revitalize the Corridor. In this scenario the communities would agree upon a Corridor plan that would take advantage of the market strengths and roles of the Corridor’s various segments. The communities would then adopt policies that would support development of the entire Corridor.

For example, the cluster of auto dealerships in Albany is an important asset to that part of the Corridor. Its long-term vitality would be increased by the location of other dealerships and supportive uses in the area. This could be encouraged by the Town of Colonie adopting policies which discourage the development of dealerships in its portion of the Corridor. Alternatively, the Northway Mall— with its access to the Northway, Wolf Road, and the airport— could attract certain types of regional retail and office development, and Albany could adopt policies to encourage and support development of the Northway Mall.

This scenario could also include shared public financing strategies in which the five communities would contribute to the maintenance and improvement of the entire Corridor.
Conclusions

Currently, the NY5 Corridor and the Capital District boast some marketable strengths, such as:

- Affordability and availability of housing;
- The relatively compact land use form of the region (the triangle defined by the three major cities) and the good access from high quality single-family neighborhoods to employment centers;
- The accessibility of open space and other recreational amenities;
- The relative accessibility to New York City that will be enhanced over time with improvements in the rail corridor;
- The availability of cultural and entertainment activities in the cities; and,
- The number of colleges and universities.

Yet the region and the Corridor have and continue to experience a combination of market forces and public policies that are deteriorating many of these strengths.

The table on the following page summarizes issues and opportunities facing the Corridor.
**Issues**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Land Use</th>
<th>Opportunities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Continued suburban expansion of the Region</td>
<td>Urban character of downtowns and cores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small parcel size throughout Corridor</td>
<td>Central location of Corridor within the Region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of local serving retail clusters</td>
<td>Wolf Road and New Karner Road Activity Nodes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policies are not responsive to local real estate economics</td>
<td>Quality and character of many residential neighborhoods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of architectural and urban design guidelines</td>
<td>Over-zoning of commercial use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of vacant land</td>
<td>Breadth of zoning designations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of comprehensive planning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic/Market</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Changing Retail economics</td>
<td>Regional traffic supports retail uses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State investment in both ends of the Corridor</td>
<td>Metroplex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long term ownership patterns have discouraged reinvestment</td>
<td>Strength of some retailers and businesses create building blocks; e.g., Swinburne Specialty Retailers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance from Rail Line to Existing Activity Centers</td>
<td>Central Avenue BID</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transportation</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dual roles of the Corridor – local and regional traffic</td>
<td>Existing transit service and ridership levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constrained width of right-of-way</td>
<td>Ongoing ITS project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor pedestrian environment in suburban segments</td>
<td>Regional transportation policies encourage creative solutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too many local access points</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Communities along the Route 5 Corridor have the potential to attract a higher level of growth than is currently projected. The Corridor must work with the issues and opportunities listed above to develop a strong set of policies to coordinate the revitalization of the Corridor. Cooperation among the Corridor communities will be essential. We suggest three planning alternatives, each requiring different levels of cooperation. First, a regional level approach will eliminate the need to implement new revitalization programs every few years. This approach will require the participation of all Corridor jurisdictions. Second, Individual/Community level planning allows for an incremental approach, by developing land use policies and design guidelines that target opportunity sites as nodes of revitalization. Finally, a Corridor approach provides a compromise between the two, requiring agreement on a Corridor plan, and the implementation of community-level policies to realize the plan.

All approaches to revitalizing the Corridor will require strong public policy tools and cooperation among the Corridor communities. With a vision, and the policies and public support for it, the Corridor can expect to be regionally competitive into the next century.
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