

# Village of Afton, NY Strategic Plan

Prepared by GeoEco Design  
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## 1. Introduction

The Village of Afton, with the guidance of GeoEco Design has created a strategic plan focusing on economic and sustainable redevelopment. The strategic plan is in response to the continued flooding, subsequent damage to property and threats to life and livelihood. In order for the Village to receive funding for a flood mitigation study, an economic revitalization study was requested by the New York State Department of State. In preparation for this plan, we sought to bring together business owners, stakeholders, residents and the governing system in the Village. The Project Advisory Committee headed by April Leggett, was an integral part of this process. They were a direct line to the community and gave thoughtful and connected feedback along the way.

As part of this plan, we created three surveys: a business survey, an organization or stakeholder survey, and a resident survey. These surveys were made available to Village businesses, organizations and residents over the period of a year. The surveys were designed to help us better understand the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) in the Village, within the parameters of the Strategic Plan. The purpose of the Strategic Plan is to give the Village a guide to improving the economic wellbeing in the Village. The goals of this plan are set up to advance the goals of the Southern Tier Regional Economic Development Council Strategic Plan: 2011-2016 and initiate local efforts to improve the economic position of the Village of Afton as well as revitalize it's waterfront.

## 2. Purpose of the Strategic Plan

As with many rural US Towns and Villages, the Village of Afton has slowly been declining. The population in Afton has been shrinking while the remaining population is aging. Young people are not moving to or staying in the Village. There are very few jobs within the Village and the local businesses seem to rely mostly on the local population. The local economy is struggling although the majority of businesses have been in operation for many years. Another specific problem in the Village of Afton is recurrent and worsening flooding.

A strategic plan for economic development has been established to address low cost energy technology, public transportation development, waterfront park development, flood mitigation, water quality and wetland restoration, as well as the historic restoration of Main St. This plan will help the Village of Afton have a clear path to becoming a sustainable city that can be an example for other rural areas in the Southern Tier. This strategic plan also advances the goals of the Regional Economic Development Council Strategic Plan: 2011-2016 and initiates local efforts to improve the economic position of Afton and revitalize its waterfront.

## 2.1 Deployment Process

The Village of Afton's Strategic Plan is presented to the community, employees and other interested parties first through a public meeting in April ,2018. It will also be made available through the posting of the document on the Village's Website, and will be provided to any person requesting the same through written request to the Village Administrator's Office.

## 2.2 Long Range Planning

The Village of Afton Strategic Plan is based on the consensus of the individuals that participated in community based survey's, public meetings, the project advisory committee who all had a hand in the formulation of the plan. It reflects ownership by the Project Advisory Committee and those participants, and, is submitted to the Village for review and approval.

## 2.3 Strategic Planning Cycle

### 2.3.1 Annually

- Participate in Village Strategic Plan Update
- Review Vision
- Draft purpose and values
- Review customer and market knowledge
- Review resident satisfaction
- Review organizational (government) focus
- Review trends and current strategic environment

### 2.3.2 Semi-annually

- Village will review their input to strategic plan (Strategies, Goals, and Measures)
- Draft update(s) to the strategic plan will be submitted to the Village Board or project Advisory Committee
- Review/approval of updated plan is conducted
- Updated plan is published/publicized

## 3. Basis for the Strategic Plan

The Village of Afton Strategic Plan is based on the Purpose, Vision, and Values of the Project Advisory Committee and members of the community. It is formulated based upon generally accepted business and public sector responsibilities, and, to the needs and expressed concern of the community it serves.

## 4. Community Profile

### 4.1 Local Business

The local business climate in the Village is struggling. The top three business types in the Village are retail, hospitality and personal services. While these businesses are an important part of a thriving economy, they are not primary industries. Many businesses have few part-time employees and an even smaller number employ anyone full time. It is also important to note that at the time of writing this strategic plan, the local grocery store was permanently closed.

### 4.2 Availability of business financing

There is only one local bank in the Village, which may limit financial options, however the local metropolitan areas such as the Triple Cities and Norwich may offer more options. Businesses in the Village, on average said that they find acquiring funding for their business to be moderate on a likert scale ranging from 1-5 with 1 being the easiest and 5 being the most difficult. This was surprising at first but upon further questioning, it seems that many businesses do not or have not applied for financing in a very traditional way. Close to 2/3rds of businesses said they relied on personal savings, family and friends, or a personal loan to start their businesses. Another 19% said they had a business loan to help them start their business. Half of businesses said they would rely on personal savings, family and friends, or a personal loan for future funding. 32% said they would rely on a business loan to expand their business. In other parts of the survey, businesses were very interested in government grants to help them expand or better run their businesses. While the actual availability of funding is unknown, businesses are looking to the future and hope to utilize multiple sources of funding to reach future goals

### 4.3 Skills of the local workforce

The local workforce consists of anyone over the age of 16 living within the Village. Education can be tied to skill levels so it is important to note the education levels within the Village here. 86% of Village residents have at least a high school diploma. 13.9% of those mentioned earlier have a bachelor's degree and another 8.9% have a graduate degree.

According to the US Census (2014), the total labor force within the Village is 459 people. Of those, 405 of them are currently employed. This leaves 54 people unemployed giving the Village an unemployment rate of 11.8%. Since there are limited full time employment options within the Village, limited transportation options could be a factor in the high unemployment rate within the Village.

Over 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of Village residents are currently employed in management or other professional occupations. Retail, food and personal services are the top industries

in the Village limiting opportunities for those with professional/managerial skills. 16% of residents work in the service industry. 16.8% work in sales and office positions while another 16.8% also work in production/transportation and material moving. 6.6% work in construction/extraction or maintenance.

The skillset in the Village is varied, however the local employment outlook is bleak. Prioritization of new business and industry types within the Village would help to create jobs and stimulate the local economy. For those who have limited education and job skills, a workforce jobs training program, or a satellite branch from Norwich could add needed value to job applicants from within and surrounding the Village of Afton. Village survey respondents felt uncertain about the need or effectiveness of such a program, however at a minimum, it helps people with low skills and experience gain confidence to get into the job market.

#### **4.4 Availability of technical assistance**

There is no real technical assistance that we have found being utilized within the Village. When stakeholders were asked about this, there seemed to be uncertainty about what technical assistance entailed or how it could be useful. One of the top business priorities for doing business in Afton was its rural identity. This rural idea could be a reason people aren't open to changes especially if they feel like they may lose some of the small town charm. However, technical assistance can help businesses run more smoothly and help them upgrade to a more modern system. More than half of the businesses in the Village have been in business for over 15 years. While this longevity is a good thing, it can also mean that different types of technical assistance could create a more efficient and sustainable economic environment. This could tie into the section above with business technical assistance being offered as part of a job skills program. The top interests by business owners was technology services and specialized help. A business skills program or workshop where current and potential business owners could have questions answered, help with financial concerns, assistance updating or implementing new technologies would be beneficial to current and future business owners within the Village.

#### **4.5 Commercial development**

There is currently very limited area for commercial development within the Village. The Village Planning Board is in the process of creating a new commercial/industrial zone. The planning board would like to see new industry move into the area bringing jobs and helping to revitalize the local economy.

Survey respondents were very interested in commercial development. Residents felt it was very important to expand and promote industry and tourism. Business owners felt that limited land for commercial development is one of the largest challenges to growth and development in the Village.

The newly proposed commercial/industrial zone in the Village would expand space for commercial development and potentially attract new businesses and industries. Village residents were very specific about what they would not like to see in the Village, such as bars and other adult entertainment establishments. They would also like to keep the Village clean and family friendly. Healthcare and tourism were the top interests for business owners while residents would like to see healthcare, more retail, and agriculture.

#### **4.6 Infrastructure Needs**

Infrastructure needs in the Village were addressed through the three surveys. All three survey's showed high interest in a sanitary sewer. Currently there is no sanitary sewer within the Village and all dwellings rely on individual septic systems. Development of a sanitary sewer could also be influential in impacting economic development.

The next infrastructure improvement wanted by residents was street improvement, specifically streetlights and sidewalks. The current state of sidewalks is poor. Improving them would give the Village a much needed facelift as well as make the Village more walkable.

#### **4.7 Interest in renovating historic structures along Main St.**

Main St. in the Village of Afton is designated as a Main Street Historic District on the National Register of Historic Places. Listing on the National Register also makes property owners eligible to be considered for Federal grants-in-aid for historic preservation. 53% of business owners were interested in preserving historic buildings in the Village. Despite this, the majority of businesses in the Village did not feel that an historic restoration of Main St. would benefit their businesses.

Close to 60% of community Organizations thought an historic restoration of Main St. Would benefit their organization. This was a very different result than what we received from business owners. However, preservation of historic buildings ranked as 4<sup>th</sup> in importance out of 6 options.

Village residents ranked preserving historic buildings as a top priority in the survey. This would help to beautify the Village, which was also of high value to Village residents.

The Main St. Historic District may have a bit of an upper hand in getting funding for building renovations. The New York State Office of Homes and Community Renewal offers various programs to revitalize Main St.'s in New York State. They also offer technical assistance to help communities figure out how best to proceed with a historic or economic renovation.

Economic revitalization ranked higher than renovating historic Main St. in all three surveys. Planning to renovate and renew Main St. in the Village should also prioritize economic revitalization. This could include options like interpretive signage and a multiuse trail that goes from the riverfront through Main St. and back toward the River. A trail could potentially connect Afton to other Susquehanna River Villages and Towns. This could attract tourists and visitors to the Main St. while also showcasing the Riverfront, which ties into the Village's vision for Afton.

#### **4.8 Low cost energy options**

Residents, Organizations, and Businesses within the Village are all very interested in low cost energy options. This option is great for current villagers and it helps people who are looking for a more sustainable way to live see the Village of Afton in a new and progressive light. New technology showcases progress and shows younger generations that Afton while rooted in the past is not stuck in the past. NYSERDA offers information, options, and incentives for solar projects throughout New York State. Southern Tier Solar Works is currently working on community solar projects in Broome, Chenango, Delaware, Otsego, and Tioga Counties.

Solar power was the top option chosen by all three groups surveyed. There are different ways to promote and implement solar power on a Village scale. Community Solar is one option where members of the community and business owners and organizations all buy into the same infrastructure. Home or business installation is another option for implementing solar power in the Village. This option requires a larger investment at an individual level.

Wind power was chosen as the second option by all three surveys as well. Wind power is a good option, but the Village does lie in the Susquehanna River Valley, which could potentially block the wind necessary for efficiency on a wind farm. The average wind speed in the Village is between 6 and 9 miles per hour according to NYSERDA Small Wind Explorer. NYSERDA also offers financial incentives for installation of wind turbines. An eligible installer can inspect the proposed placement of a wind turbine and provide a quote

#### **4.9 Public Transportation**

The current public transportation in the Village is not well known and used even less. This can lead to medical and nutritional needs in an aging population such as the Village of Afton going unmet.

Chenango First Transit offers two looped routes in the Village, the first leaving at 7:55AM and arriving in Norwich at 9:03AM. The second Loop which would take riders back to Afton leaves Norwich at 1:45 and returns to Afton at 2:58PM. This route may work for medical appointments or short trips to Norwich, but is not conducive to employment. Chenango First Transit also offers Medicaid transport in Chenango County.

Broome County Rural Transit offers Country Rural Transportation to Colesville, NY which is about nine miles from the Village. This option takes riders directly into Binghamton where they can connect with many other public transportation routes.

Birnie Bus Service, which is located in Central New York, was rumored to have a route in Chenango County but the closest it gets to Afton is a route from Oneonta to Cooperstown.

First Transit is a national bus service that may also offer options for the Village to look into. They offer services to partner with an already existing transportation system, or government to customize solutions that fit specific transportation needs. This could offer an option to create an energy efficient transportation system that connects rural areas to nearby metropolitan areas.

There are also personal run hail services such as UBER and LYFT. These options are usually less expensive than a taxi and could offer part time work for Village residents. Car share services such as Zipcar can also be good options for those who do not want to be limited to public transportation

## 5. Organizational Focus

- **People:** Elected and appointed officials who care for and support our citizens, the employees, customers, visitors and the environment by meeting professional and personal expectations. This will be further manifested in the provision of an environment that encourages maximum employee individual potential.
- **Readiness:** Ensuring that appropriate services and resources are available for Village residents. This includes proper organization of information of Village knowledge and resources.
- **Transformation:** Posturing the Village of Afton for future relevance and response to natural as well as manmade disasters. This shall include updated technology and services.

## 6. Vision

Afton is a lovely Susquehanna River Valley community seeking to remain a friendly, safe, and walkable community with plenty of green open spaces and fresh air. Afton will revitalize its economy by promoting and enhancing its rural character, small town charm, and, in addition, develop sustainable economic growth such as:

1. Enhancing access and enjoyment of the Susquehanna River by creating a riverside recreational park.

2. Mitigation of flooding by working with NYS Department of Transportation and other available resources.
3. Enhancing the appearance of Main St. and preserving historical buildings.
4. Utilizing sustainable alternative technologies to supply low cost energy to residents and businesses.
5. Develop low cost and convenient public transportation that will connect with the surrounding communities.

## 7. Future Actions

There are three general paths to any development plan. They can be used in total or specific parts that best fit the values and ideals of the area can be selected from within any of the three options. The focus of this Strategic Plan is Economic and Waterfront Revitalization.

**Option 1:** Do nothing. The Village in its current state is in decline. Residents, specifically young adults are leaving the Village. There have not been any significant improvements to the Village in many years. Most of the planning documents from the Village are from 1969. While this option is the most cost effective, it does not solve any of the current problems facing the Village today.

**Option 2:** Innovation and Sustainability. This option would potentially put the spotlight on the Village as a leader in rural environmental and economic sustainability. This option would include renovating and retrofitting historic Main St. and moving residences out of the flood plain. Creating a sewer system and implementing alternative energies, green technologies, green infrastructure, and an inclusive public transportation system.

- Renovating and retrofitting Historic Main St. using best management practices.
  - Create a flood-water storage system under Main St. and the adjacent sidewalks.
    - Porous pavement
    - Bioretention areas
    - Rain barrels
    - Infiltration trenches
    - Vegetative swales
  - Plant trees along main St.
- Recreate wetlands in the floodplain.
  - Buyout and relocation of homes within the floodplain
  - Buyout of farmland located within the floodplain
  - Create an interpretive wetland park that connects the Village of Afton with adjacent communities such as Sidney and Bainbridge.

- Develop a sewer system – this will increase expenses in the Village, including taxes and other water fees. The cost to build a wastewater treatment facility and the entire associated infrastructure including costs for an environmental assessment. Other associated costs to the Village would be maintenance of and staff to oversee the water treatment plant.
  - A more feasible option might be creating greywater systems or other potentially water saving resources.
- Develop a transportation system that connects with nearby transportation systems
  - Utilize UBER/LYFT
  - Look into Zipcar
  - Look into purchasing a local bus or van to connect with higher use transportation systems.
- Create a pathway to attract and retain new business especially primary source businesses.

**Option 3: Mixed Methods** – This option should still rely heavily on economic development, best management practices, and alleviating flooding in the Village.

- Promote economic development
  - Work with Chenango County to increase job training for Village residents.
  - Offer space and incentives for technical skills assistance programs in the Village.
  - Offer incentives to new businesses ie: creative and flexible options within the new commercial area.
- Promote new methods of transportation
  - Zipcar
  - UBER/LYFT
  - Bridge the gap between Afton and higher density locations
- Alternative energies
  - Community solar – vs – individual solar
  - Wind
- Retrofit historic Main St.
  - Clean up and maintain buildings
  - Green infrastructure
    - New permeable sidewalks
    - Tree trenches
    - Rain gardens
    - Rain Barrels
    - Look into lightweight green roof
    - Solar panel installations
  - Make buildings ADA accessible
- Infrastructure needs
  - Look into assistance for updating septic systems where possible
  - Fix Main Street

- Update with permeable pavement
  - Rain gardens
  - Trench drains
  - Water reservoir
- Solar powered street lights
- Update Parking lot between Main Street and the Susquehanna River
  - Use permeable pavers
  - Tree trenches
  - Rain gardens
  - Solar powered lights
  - Solar power installation

## 8. Potential Funding Sources

Funding sources and considerations for building Naturally resilient communities

- <http://nrcsolutions.org/funding/>

NYSDOT culvert replacement program

- <https://www.dot.ny.gov/BRIDGENY>

Upper Susquehanna Coalition Buffer Funding Program

- <https://uppersusquehanna.wordpress.com/2017/06/20/usc-buffer-program-funding-opportunity/>

Funding opportunities through the Upper Susquehanna Coalition

- <http://www.u-s-c.org/html/Projects.htm>

EPA wetland restoration funding

- <https://www.epa.gov/wetlands/wetlands-funding>

FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant Program

- <https://www.fema.gov/hazard-mitigation-grant-program>