

Village of Canajoharie Comprehensive Plan Professional perspectives

The following professional perspectives represent baseline impressions of the community taken prior to obtaining real date about the communities resources.

A professional community planner and a professional landscape architect present the following perspectives of the Village of Canajoharie. These perspectives are the contemporaneous points of view of two professionals after a self-guided tour of the village and without the influence of past history and current socioeconomic data.

Regional Context

The Village of Canajoharie is nestled along the shoreline of the Mohawk River/Erie Canal in the Mohawk Valley. It is located within the Town of Canajoharie, which is in Montgomery County. The land use surrounding Canajoharie is primarily agricultural land use. The beautiful Canajoharie Creek and Gorge run through the village and contribute to its physical layout. Its immediate neighboring community is the Village of Palatine Bridge, located across the bridge on the north shores of the Mohawk River. Canajoharie is one of many moderately sized villages in the Mohawk Valley, from Utica east to Albany.

Community Planner Perspective

A. Neighborhood Character

Downtown

Downtown Canajoharie is a grouping of diverse areas with a central historic district. There are a variety of land uses throughout downtown. The highest percentage of land use appears to be commercial (restaurant/bar, pizza shops, personal services, and retail). However, this is combined with professional offices, residential (primarily rental units), industrial (Beech

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Nut), and municipal (village office, police department, library). What appear to be missing are a local grocery store, clothing boutique/store, and general merchandise store. In general, the downtown area consists of varying lot sizes with some streets distinctly defined by a cohesive building fabric, some streets with a more open streetscape due to the absence of buildings, and some streets with a suburban development feel. It appears that many buildings, with the exception of Beech Nut, are the same as they were in the early 20th century. This suggests there may be a concern with the capacity of the older infrastructure to meet the demands of businesses today. There is a village green space for community events downtown; however, there isn't an active playground or park either downtown or within walking distance for the residents who live there.

At one time there were multiple bridges across Canajoharie Creek. Some of these bridges have been removed, limiting the points at which vehicles and/or people can cross over the creek. The reestablishment of a pedestrian/bike-only bridge across the creek would add to the "walkability" of the village.

The street network follows a grid pattern for the most part. Church Street, which is Route 10, is very narrow and has parking on both sides and is curbed with sidewalks on both sides. The buildings are located side by side (many share a common wall) and are built to the edge of the sidewalk. At both ends of this two-block section, the streetscape changes dramatically. Route 5S traverses east/west through the village. It is also narrow with parking and sidewalks on both sides for approximately four to five blocks.

West Hill Residential Neighborhood

The majority of the housing stock appears to be approximately 50 years or older. It appears that very few homes have been built within the last 10 to 15 years. For the most part, the homes are in good condition. There are some beautiful historic homes that offer significant value to the community at large. It appears there are rental units on Cliff Street at the lower end of the hill. Vacancy rates appear to be low and ownership high. The land uses in this residential neighborhood appear to be limited to residential (single and multiple family) with a few home businesses, such as beauty shops. There is a place of

worship in this neighborhood but no school buildings or parks. The majority of streets are connected except for those at the top of the hill, which are dead ends that do not connect with any other existing streets. The Canajoharie Gorge and Creek separate this neighborhood from the East Hill neighborhood. The only pedestrian connections from this neighborhood to downtown are the sidewalks along the streets; however, there are opportunities for pedestrian-only paths to connect with downtown.

East Hill Residential Neighborhood

The housing stock in the East Hill neighborhood also appears approximately 50 years or older. Similar to the West Hill neighborhood, it appears very few homes have been built within the last decade. This neighborhood begins down the hill closer to the valley floor and continues up the hill to the location of the new high school. There are a few houses in various stages of neglect and disrepair. And there are beautiful estate homes with historic significance to the village and region. Although there are no neighborhood parks, the school playgrounds are located within this neighborhood. The land uses are predominantly residential and municipal (elementary/middle/high schools) with a few home businesses. Vacancy rates appear to be low and ownership high.

B. Vehicular Traffic

At certain times, a higher volume of traffic occurs in the village than the size of the village would warrant. This suggests that the village experiences through traffic in addition to destination traffic. This makes sense due to the two state routes that run through the village and the NYS Thruway entrance/exit ramp. The volume of traffic clearly fluctuates during the day as well as during the week. There tends to be congestion along Church Street (NYS Route 10) as well as NYS Route 5 during the week. This congestion is exacerbated by the narrowness of Church and Main Streets. The majority of roadways have not been improved in a while.

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Both Routes 10 and 5S provide a connection to the region. As a result, commercial trucks frequently travel through the village. Also, there is a Thruway entrance a few blocks east of the village.

The truck traffic poses a challenge to the village. Due to the narrowness of the streets and intersections, much of the truck traffic can cause too much congestion. There does not appear to be a concern regarding volume of traffic in either of the two residential neighborhoods. The speed limits for the entire village appear to be appropriate for the area.

C. Pedestrian Connections

The village does have a comprehensive network of sidewalks throughout the downtown center and both neighborhoods. There are opportunities for pedestrian-only connections between Cliff Street and downtown. The New York State Canal Corporation has established a portion of its bike path through the village. This is a significant beneficial recreational connection to the region. There is an opportunity to connect this bike path to Wintergreen Park through the establishment of a bike route and/or a pedestrian pathway.

D. Local Economy

At first blush, the local Canajoharie economy appears to be stable. However, a closer look reveals that there is not a variety of employment opportunities within the village and consequently a significant portion of the community commutes to other towns, villages, and cities for employment purposes. As a result, the local commerce is diminished. Areas in which Canajoharie can improve its local economy are in recreational opportunities and art/entertainment tourism. These opportunities must be explored to enhance the local economy.

Landscape Architect Perspective

A. Neighborhood Context

Downtown

Downtown Canajoharie includes the area from the Mohawk River south to Cliff Street and from the western edge of the village along Route 5S east to the Thruway entrance. The most physically impressive section of downtown is the historic section that includes three blocks along Church Street from the Thruway overpass south to Cliff Street and one block (east and west) off Church Street. The historic downtown section is unique in that it has retained its historical dimensions and character. Church Street is a quaint, narrow street with historical curb, sidewalk, and parking lines and relationships intact. The buildings that line Church Street from Erie Boulevard to Mohawk Street are all built to the sidewalk and thus provide a uniform fabric that defines the streetscape, adding to its local as well as statewide uniqueness. Additionally, all of the buildings have multiple floors, providing uniformity in building height and scale. The scale of the buildings (width x height) in relationship to the width of the street and sidewalks establishes a unique character to the area that is inviting to all visitors. The intersection of Church and Main Streets adds to the character in this historic district in that it is distinctive with right angles. Even though this section of Church Street lacks street trees, it is nevertheless inviting because of its overall scale. However, this tightly knit streetscape does open up at both ends. Church Street from Erie Boulevard north to the Palatine Bridge opens up considerably with buildings set back from the sidewalk with manicured front lawns. Although set back from the sidewalk, the library and local church are of significant historic value and as such fit within their surroundings. The Beech Nut factory buildings have historic context but color, condition, and modifications cause them to present a negative aspect to the surrounding streetscapes and Thruway. To the south at Church and Mohawk, the streetscape opens up on the west side with few parking lots and a village green lawn.

When traveling west from Church Street to the intersection of Erie Boulevard and West Main Street the character of the downtown falls apart. At this intersection, the street edges appear to have eroded, sidewalks end, building façades are

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discordant, and building location varies per parcel. It is at this point that the downtown begins to look and feel like a suburban corridor. The remaining portion of Route 5S is uninteresting as it lacks sidewalks lined with trees to soften the harsh environment. This section has neither an urban nor a rural character and lacks a sense of any reasonable order or structure.

The section of downtown east of Church Street from Route 5S south to Montgomery Street has a distinct character tied into Canajoharie Creek, which flows through it. The streets (Little Mohawk Street, ____ Street) are narrow and in need of repair. The building typologies vary but remain at a scale that relates to the narrowness of the streets and invites pedestrian activity. One street that is physically separate from the other downtown sections is Mill Street. This street is independent due to the landform that surrounds it: Canajoharie Creek to the east and a steep slope to the west. Similar to the other downtown sections the street width is narrow with sidewalks on both sides with all buildings fronting the sidewalks. Again, the building height and size in relationship to the narrow street establishes a streetscape character that is intriguing and inviting to the pedestrian. This character continues for approximately three blocks, and then striking views of Canajoharie Creek appeal to the visitor. Mill Street remains relatively open until it ends at an undeveloped area used for storage and parking. Its scale and unique natural and cultural resources make this another unique corridor with strong potential within the community.

The uses in downtown appear to be diverse with commercial, restaurant/retail, professional, residential, municipal, community services, and industrial. Canajoharie has the essential elements for an active downtown with the exception of a recreational park for its downtown residents. However, to realize its full potential Canajoharie needs to mend some “scars” in its structural community fabric, and improvements (to its scale, structures, circulation) should focus on building upon its cultural resources.

West Hill Residential Neighborhood

This neighborhood essentially begins at Cliff Street and continues up the hillside to the southern edge of the village. The valley floor to the north and the gorge to the west provide natural edges for the neighborhood with the village boundary to the

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south and west. The housing types are a diverse mix of single-family and multiple-family as well as a mix of styles and age. The newer homes are located at the top of the hillside with the more historic homes primarily located on Cliff Street. All the streets are connected except for a few “dead ends” at the top of the hill. The houses are uniformly spaced throughout the neighborhood, with similar front yards and some with deep back yards, with the exception of some of the newer homes. The streets are lined with sidewalks and street trees. Some of the newer streets and homes lack the historical context for street trees, setbacks, and density. The majority of homes appear to be occupied and in good condition. Some of the homes along Cliff Street appear to be undergoing some renovations. There is a beautiful pond off of Shapers Avenue that appears to be on private property. There isn't a park in this neighborhood and the closest park is located across the gorge at the elementary school.

East Hill Residential Neighborhood

Similar to the West Hill neighborhood, this residential neighborhood is a comfortable “village size” with the houses evenly distributed throughout, with the exception of some of the newer houses and streets that lack the historical village/urban context in terms of density, setbacks, etc. The houses are of mixed type and style and appear in good condition; however, a few houses are in clear need of immediate rehabilitation. These few have a negative impact on the neighborhood. This neighborhood has the benefit of having the schools located within it. There are some commercial uses, such as a green house and a factory at the bottom of the gorge. There are a few churches and a senior citizens center (nursing home) near Montgomery Street. The streets are lined with sidewalks and street trees to provide a pleasant pedestrian environment. Although this neighborhood is internally connected, due to the gorge and creek, the only access to downtown is via Montgomery Street.

B. Vehicular Traffic

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The village has more vehicular traffic than its size warrants. This is due to the regional connection that Routes 5S and 10 provide as well as the proximity of the Thruway entrance. The impact from this traffic is felt in terms of congestion along Church and Main Streets. Nevertheless, the traffic speed and movement is directly influenced by the physical structure of the historic downtown. Due to the narrowness of the streets, semi-tractor trailers cannot turn at the intersection of Church and Main Streets. As a result, much of the commercial truck traffic must travel a circuitous route through the entire downtown to simply get to the Thruway entrance, which is three blocks east of Church Street. This and the commercial truck traffic generated by Beech Nut add significantly to the overall traffic congestion. Noise, fumes, and physical presence of these large visually intrusive vehicles compromise the area's "pedestrian friendly" qualities. The establishment of a more direct truck route for all Beech Nut deliveries from the Thruway exit to the north side of the building (where the loading docks are stationed) would effectively reduce some of the truck traffic congestion on Church Street. Also, relocating the "turnaround point" for trucks from the intersection of Erie Boulevard and West Main Street to another area farther west along Route 5S would alleviate the stress at that location and allow the village to recapture and revitalize that portion of downtown.

Despite the extra vehicular (car) traffic, there appears to be few vehicular-pedestrian conflict points and this is probably due to the narrowness of the streets, which causes the cars to slow down and allows pedestrians to cross the streets with little risk. The scale of the streets remains uniform throughout the village. Again this is an unusual asset that many villages have lost to suburban sprawl. Another unusual and unique feature for the village is the functioning "dummy traffic light" in the middle of Wagner Square. This traffic light adds to the character of the village and reflects back on the community's history, and as such should be preserved at all costs. Additionally, the west side of Church Street from Mohawk to ___ Street, which is used for parking, needs to have its structural "edge" reestablished and thus reconnected with the historic buildings across the street. This will allow the village pedestrian character to continue along Church Street south to Mill Street, which will influence a positive revitalization of that area.

C. Pedestrian Connections

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The village has sustained its pedestrian friendly village feel and is clearly walkable throughout. Although sidewalks are provided in all village neighborhoods there are opportunities for “pedestrian only” connections such as pedestrian bridges across the creek and pedestrian/bike paths from the West Hill neighborhood to downtown. Additionally, there are opportunities for a pedestrian and/or bike path from Riverfront Park to Wintergreen Park.