

Cohoes Boulevard

Brownfield Opportunity Area

FINAL Nomination Study

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1 Project Description & Boundary

1.1 Lead Project Sponsors

The City of Cohoes is the municipality sponsoring the Cohoes Boulevard Brownfield Opportunity Area (BOA) Nomination Study, a program funded, administered, and overseen by the New York State Department of State (DOS), with technical support provided by the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). In conjunction with this BOA Nomination Study, the City of Cohoes also undertook the Delaware Avenue BOA Pre-Nomination Study located on the neighboring Van Schaick and Simmons Islands. As these two BOA programs share a boundary along the Mohawk River, there is considerable overlap that exists in terms of the overall vision of these areas. Together, these two initiatives will build on the City's framework for revitalization within the waterfront and downtown business district.

1.2 Introduction to the BOA Program

The Brownfield Opportunity Area (BOA) Program was developed in 2003 as the planning component of the NYS Superfund/Brownfield Law (GML Article 18-C, Section 970-r), providing municipalities and community-based organizations with financial and technical assistance to complete area-wide revitalization strategies for neighborhoods impacted by the presence of brownfields and environmental hazards. At the completion of the program, communities will be designated a BOA, increasing their competitive position for access to funding and incentives under the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) Brownfield Cleanup Program, the Empire State Development Corporation's economic development programs, and many other State and Federal assistance opportunities.

Brownfield sites are typically former industrial or commercial properties where operations may have resulted in environmental impairment. The NYS Department of State (NYSDOS) and NYSDEC recognize the expansive detrimental impacts these sites have on their surrounding neighborhoods, and that brownfield impacts are not limited to individual sites or adjoining property. The marketability and viability of entire neighborhoods are impacted by the presence, or potential presence, of contaminated sites by negatively affecting the psychology of residents and potential investors. The negative psychological effects of brownfields can lead to disinvestment and blight radiating outward far beyond the impacted sites or immediate area. The BOA Program assists communities in identifying and analyzing sources of neighborhood distress and provides the resources and capacity to develop and implement revitalization strategies. State and federal programs also exist, such as the DEC Environmental Restoration Program, the DEC Brownfield Cleanup Program, and the US Environmental Protection Agency's Brownfield Program. These programs focus on physical investigations and activities, further assisting local municipalities in dealing with brownfield properties and their impacts on communities.

1.3 Project Description

1.3.1 General Overview

The proposed Cohoes Boulevard BOA Study Area is located in the City of Cohoes in Albany County, New York (see Figures 1 and 2). Covering 460 acres, the proposed BOA is situated between the Mohawk River to the north and east, an abandoned railroad corridor to the west, and the City's southern boundary to the south (*refer to Map 1 – Cohoes Boulevard BOA Boundary*). The Study Area is home to the City's central business district, as well as areas of higher density residential and mixed-use neighborhoods.

Traversing the Study Area are two of the City's primary transportation thoroughfares – State Route (SR) 787 (i.e., Cohoes Boulevard) and SR 470. Cohoes Boulevard provides the primary transportation access to the City's downtown business district and waterfront areas and is considered the main gateway into the City. Constructed in the 1970s, Cohoes Boulevard serves as both the main connection between the City and the majority of the Capital District to the south, and as a pass-through for commuters living in southern Saratoga County, particularly the Towns of Waterford and Clifton Park. The Study Area also serves as the main connection between the City's residential districts and large portions of the City's waterfront.

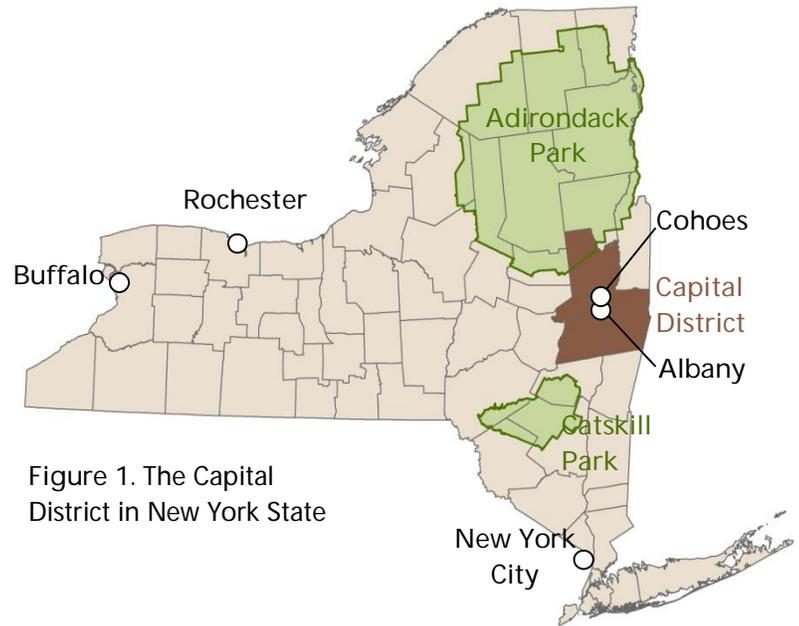


Figure 1. The Capital District in New York State



Figure 2. City of Cohoes in the Capital District region

Based on information provided in the Pre-Nomination Study, the primary community revitalization objectives to be achieved by this project include:

- Utilizing the City's wealth of natural, cultural and transportation resources to improve the City's urban character;
- Identifying and attracting economic development opportunities and promote a positive image to make the City a unique place to live, work and play;
- Improving public access to, and recreational use of, the City's Mohawk and Hudson River waterfront properties; and
- Promoting commercial development in easily accessible areas adjacent to the City's historic downtown business district and major transportation corridors, specifically the Cohoes Boulevard and SR 470 corridors.

A few of the primary opportunities to be addressed by this project include the beautification of the Cohoes Boulevard gateway into the City, development opportunities associated with the amount of traffic using the Cohoes Boulevard/SR 787 corridor, increased connectivity between the Study Area, City residential neighborhoods and the waterfront, including improved wayfinding to Remsen Street and the City's downtown business district. Through this effort, the City hopes to see the Study Area become an integrated, safe and desirable place to start a business, raise a family or visit.

As noted in the Pre-Nomination Study, due to its relatively large size, the Study Area has been separated into four sub-areas, designated Character Area I through IV, based on the community characteristics in each area (*refer to Map 2 – Character Areas*). A more detailed discussion of the Cohoes Boulevard BOA Study Area and Character Areas can be found in Section 3.2.

1.3.2 Redevelopment Potential

Redevelopment within the Cohoes Boulevard BOA is driven by numerous factors, including the availability of vacant parcels, the influx of residential units over the past decade and the City's position along the Mohawk River waterfront. Vacant and underutilized parcels account for approximately 10 percent of total land area within the Study Area. Conglomerations of vacant and underutilized properties, particularly within the Central Business District (CBD) and Columbia South (SoCo) neighborhoods and along the Mohawk River waterfront present an opportunity for larger revitalization opportunities. Redevelopment of waterfront properties including the former Municipal Landfill, the St. Michael's property and the property at 32 New Cortland Street could have a strong catalytic effect on the redevelopment of downtown Cohoes and the surrounding residential neighborhoods. Redevelopment opportunities within Cohoes will need to take advantage of the waterfront location of the City, substituting non water-dependent uses along the Mohawk River for water-dependent uses that can breathe new life into the BOA.

The Nomination Study for the Cohoes Boulevard BOA includes a conceptual master plan and build out analysis for a preferred development alternative selected through deliberation by the project steering committee with significant public input throughout the course of the project. The constraints imposed by existing conditions within the BOA described in this Nomination Study have also played a crucial role in shaping redevelopment potential in the City.

1.3.3 Related Planning Studies and Efforts

In a continuing effort toward revitalization, the City has conducted several planning efforts over the last 13 years that directly relate to the Study Area. These planning efforts include the Reconfiguration of Cohoes Boulevard Expanded Project Proposal, the Route 470 Corridor Study, the Cohoes Downtown Redevelopment Plan and the Urban Waterfront Rediscovery Plan. In particular, the Downtown Redevelopment Plan involved the formation of a 14-person Advisory Committee, consisting of City business owners and residents, to identify redevelopment options and strategies for the City's downtown business district. This advisory committee also guided the development of the City's Waterfront Rediscovery Plan. The plans incorporated and/or referred to several portions of the proposed BOA. The area of the proposed BOA east of SR 787 was included in the Urban Waterfront Rediscovery planning efforts and the northern portion of the proposed BOA was included in the Route 470 Corridor Study. The Cohoes Downtown Redevelopment Plan includes areas in the northwestern portion of the proposed BOA. A brief description of each of these planning efforts can be found below.

State Route 787 Corridor Pre-Nomination Study (2009)

The State Route 787 Corridor Pre-Nomination Study focused on providing a preliminary description and analysis of the Study Area to evaluate the impacts of potential brownfields. The original Study Area of 413 acres identified three target areas with potential brownfields and/or vacant and underutilized sites: the North Target Area, Scrap Yard Target Area, and South Target Area. Brownfields identified as part of this effort included properties located within the SR 787 corridor that did not conform to existing zoning or development goals, or were vacant and had potential to contribute to the City's redevelopment goals. The plan additionally identified potential redevelopment opportunities as well as further studies recommended for subsequent phases of the BOA project. These included assessment of current transportation circulation systems, incorporation of Green Building and LEED construction standards into the zoning code, a market analysis for strategic sites, a build out and bulk study of the corridor to project future traffic demands and a relocation feasibility analysis for active businesses on underutilized strategic sites.

Urban Waterfront Rediscovery Plan (2005)

The Waterfront Rediscovery Plan examined development possibilities at four underutilized waterfront sites that border the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers, including two sites within the Cohoes Boulevard BOA Study Area – the Northern Gateway site and the Southern gateway site. Redevelopment scenarios for each of the sites were created based on the data and the feedback

provided via the Steering Committee, City leaders, and the public, as well as the findings from site and market assessments. The redevelopment scenarios, along with site specific Implementation Approaches, assisted the City in its efforts to attract interest and investment in its waterfront from public and private partnerships. The most recent results from this Plan include newly constructed townhouse units along the Hudson River waterfront and along Dyke Avenue.

Reconfiguration of Cohoes Boulevard Expanded Project Proposal (2004)

In an effort to improve the safety, function and attractiveness of the Cohoes Boulevard Corridor, the City of Cohoes commissioned a reconfiguration study with the assistance of the NYSDOT. The overall goal of the Reconfiguration of Cohoes Boulevard Expanded Project Proposal (EPP) is to make it an attractive and identifiable feature of the City's urban fabric, enhance the success of recent revitalization efforts and improve the attractiveness of Cohoes as a place to live, work and visit. As a result of the EPP, six feasible alternatives are currently under consideration:

- Alternative No. 2, Raised Center Median with Landscaped Edge
- Alternative No. 2b, Raised Center Median with Landscaped Edge and Roundabouts
- Alternative No. 3, Raised Center Median with Bicycle/Pedestrian Features
- Alternative No. 3b, Raised Center Median with Bicycle/Pedestrian Features and Roundabouts
- Alternative No. 3c, Raised Center Median with Multi-use Path
- Alternative No. 3d, Raised Center Median with Multi-use Path and Roundabouts

Any roadway improvements would be constructed in harmony with the needs of the community by employing cost-effective methods, while retaining the overall capacity and efficiency of this important commuter roadway.

Cohoes Downtown Redevelopment Plan (2002)

The City of Cohoes Downtown Redevelopment Plan was completed in 2002, utilizing Governor's Office for Small Cities Technical Assistance Grant Program funds. The Downtown Redevelopment Plan is action oriented, providing clear and achievable redevelopment and image building strategies for the City, merchants, potential investors and residents. A 14-person Advisory Committee was formed to identify redevelopment options and strategies. In a continuing effort towards revitalization, Cohoes took a proactive look at the appearance, functionality and economic mix of its central business district.

Route 470 Corridor Study (2000)

In 2000, the City of Cohoes undertook the development of the Route 470 Study, which was the first step in a multi-phased process that identified strategies for redevelopment in the City of Cohoes. The purpose of the document was to provide a coherent framework for corridor

improvements, economic development opportunities, and resource preservation to guide future public and private capital investments.

As part of the Route 470 Study, a list of corridor development implementation items was created, which included:

- The development of a strategic plan for the revitalization of Remsen Street (completed in 2002);
- The revision of the City's Zoning Code (completed in 2006); and
- The creation of a Main Street program for Remsen Street to organize residents and business owners, provide merchant support and restructuring assistance, promote available sites to potential businesses, and ensure consistent, attractive and historically relevant design guidance (completed in 2007).

1.4 Community Vision, Goals & Objectives

1.4.1 Supporting the City's Vision

Over the past several years, the City of Cohoes has worked towards the revitalization of its downtown business district, which includes portions of the Cohoes Boulevard BOA Study Area (see Section 1.3.3). As part of these planning efforts, the City has put forth a collective vision that is based on significant public input. To ensure the vision and goals established as part of the City's recent planning efforts is continued, members of the Advisory Committees from previous planning efforts are also serving on the BOA Steering Committee.

1.4.2 A Vision for the BOA in 2020 and Beyond

During the Pre-Nomination phase of the BOA program, the community identified a vision specific to the Cohoes Boulevard BOA that identifies how they would like to see the Study Area enhanced and improved in the future. The vision statement captures and embraces the elements of the BOA that the City desires to preserve, while recognizing that changes are necessary to realize the future potential of this area.

ISION FOR THE COHOES BOULEVARD BOA STUDY AREA

The Cohoes Boulevard BOA Study Area is an integrated, safe and desirable place to start a business, raise a family, access world class recreational resources and learn more about our country's industrial heritage. As the Capital District's premiere transit-oriented community, Cohoes provides an integrated multi-modal network allowing residents and visitors to navigate the community in a safe and efficient manner. Our waterfront provides a vibrant mix of residential and commercial uses and is now a destination for water based recreation. The Central Business District is the core of the Cohoes Boulevard Study Area and our community, providing access to a mix of uses, cultural resources, services, retail shopping and employment opportunities. Cohoes Boulevard, once a barrier in our community, is now the gateway to the City and an integral part of our identity.

1.4.3 BOA Goals and Strategic Objectives

In support of the Vision Statement, the City has identified a series of goals to help guide decisions and future investments. Each of the goals is supported by strategic objectives drawn from input generated by the public, steering committee, project stakeholders, and City staff.

Each objective has been addressed through the BOA planning and design process and is included within the Master Plan in Section 5 as a series of recommendations for capital projects, administrative activities, and changes to the Study Area land use pattern. Tables 31, 32, and 33 summarize how each of the goals and objectives are addressed through project recommendations.

Goal 1 – Make the Waterfront a Destination

Waterfronts are natural destinations, offering picturesque views and recreation opportunities. They also serve as a centerpiece and attraction for many types of development and activities. Regardless of the season, people enjoy being near the water. Tapping into this potential involves managing waterfront land uses, ensuring that the highest and best use of the land is in place wherever feasible. The Cohoes Boulevard BOA has 2.2 miles of waterfront land along the Mohawk River. However, not all lands are developed to their full potential. The City must continue to move forward with efforts to promote economic development along the Mohawk River.

Objectives:

- 1.1 Attract mixed-use development with high quality public access opportunities.
- 1.2 Capitalize on and market the Study Area's developable waterfront properties.
- 1.3 Improve connections between the Mohawk River waterfront and downtown.
- 1.4 Provide attractive housing alternatives for businesses seeking a high quality of life for their employees.
- 1.5 Enhance waterfront recreation opportunities to encourage active, healthy lifestyle choices.

Goal 2 – Ensure the Central Business District Supports City and Regional Residents

Historic cities and villages located within a metropolitan area face a significant challenge in finding a focused identity. They recognize the importance of preserving their historic fabric while trying to meet the demands of a more modern and automobile-oriented society. Cohoes in some respects functions as a bedroom community to the Capital District. Yet, the community's vision is to increase the mixed-use vitality of its historic downtown, serving locals, regional residents, and tourists. Additionally, the City is located on a major commuter corridor in the region. This confluence of challenges and opportunities are at the center of the City's revitalization efforts. The adjacent neighborhoods, which have higher concentrations of poverty compared to the rest of the City, should be the focus of housing rehabilitation and greater provision of daily goods and services. At the same time, the City should identify opportunities for higher end housing that supports the businesses typically associated with successful downtown revitalization. As that momentum begins to build, Cohoes can emerge as a regional focal point for reinvestment and activity.

Objectives:

- 2.1 Increase the visibility and accessibility of the Central Business District from outside.
- 2.2 Locate modern amenities and services downtown while preserving historic character.
- 2.3 Support the viability of businesses along Remsen Street.
- 2.4 Improve conditions in the neighborhoods within and adjacent to the Central Business District.

Goal 3 – Offer a Diverse Urban Experience

After many decades of development trends pulling families and businesses into suburban locations, the desire to be “downtown” is re-emerging. More and more people are seeking a walkable urban environment that is rich in history, has a dynamic mix of activities, is focused on locally-owned and niche businesses, and fosters a greater sense of community and civic pride. This trend has yet to yield the critical mass to be purely market-driven, but communities like Cohoes have been actively stimulating investment consistent with this trend. The City’s historic building stock, walkable network of streets connecting to neighborhoods and the waterfront, and central location within the Capital District make it a well-positioned to further invest in downtown revitalization. The presence of the high-volume Cohoes Boulevard through the City creates a unique opportunity to capture a higher percentage of through traffic to boost revitalization efforts. The waterfront in particular presents an opportunity to truly differentiate this urban experience from the surrounding suburbs. The City must set forth a design philosophy that instills a sense of pride in the community and translates to high quality streetscapes, public spaces, and new development projects.

Objectives:

- 3.1 Create an atmosphere that attracts new residents, visitors, and businesses to downtown.
- 3.2 Promote the small-scale, walkable urban form with access to transit.
- 3.3 Embrace “Complete Streets” design concepts.
- 3.4 Improve awareness of the remaining Erie Canal assets and their role in providing cultural and recreational resources to the community.
- 3.5 Promote and expand the area’s healthy living characteristics.
- 3.6 Encourage sustainable infill development within the Central Business District.
- 3.7 Continue to provide programming on Remsen Street that attracts visitors all year.