



# Framework *for* Regional Growth

ERIE + NIAGARA COUNTIES, NEW YORK

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# 1. Introduction

## FRAMEWORK *for* REGIONAL GROWTH

### 1.1 FILLING A VOID

The absence of a region-wide vision for conservation, development, and public investment has become an increasingly central concern of the Region’s leaders. For the past two to three decades—the last regional plan was completed in 1974—local and regional actions have occurred without the benefit of reference to a larger policy or planning framework. Important decisions regarding the location and pace of development, investments in economic development, the extension of sewer and water service, improvements to parks and major public facilities, and investments in transportation infrastructure have been made without a clear sense of how individual actions influence the Region’s livability and economic vitality.

To fill this void, Erie & Niagara Counties have partnered to develop the Framework for Regional Growth. As envisioned by County

leaders, the Framework establishes basic policies and principles to guide the future growth and development of the Region. Specifically, the Framework provides:

- a vision for how we wish the region to grow and redevelop over the next 15 years;
- direction regarding growth and redevelopment matters to county decision-makers and other regional organizations linked to the two counties via funding, membership, or other relationships;
- information on the ways local governments, private sector, and non-profit actions and initiatives can reinforce the overall regional vision; and
- mechanisms to insure that the goals, concepts, and recommendations of the Framework for Regional Growth are implemented in an efficient and accountable manner.

## 1.2 ADDRESSING CHALLENGES

Over the past 30 years, the region’s economic vitality, community livability, and environmental quality have been seriously challenged. In addition to the effects of national and international-level influences—global competition and free trade, unfunded mandates from state and federal governments, and the rise of the sunbelt—decisions about the pace, pattern, and form of development have affected the region’s ability to attract investment and retain talent. The combined

effects of disinvestment and sprawling development has reduced the livability of older neighborhoods, eroded the competitive position of traditional centers of commerce and industry; increased fiscal stress; isolated low income, minority and elderly residents; and threatened the resources that make the region an attractive place to live—river and lake fronts, historic city, town, and village centers, and rural landscapes.

### Framework Mission Statement

*The Framework for Regional Growth is a document prepared and supported by Erie and Niagara Counties. It is to be utilized as a blueprint to support the actions of county and regional agencies relating to the area’s physical development. It will also be used to inform state and local governments, private developers, and non-profit organizations about the process and actions County government could undertake when making decisions affecting the region’s development.*

*The Regional Framework will help the Erie and Niagara Counties region make decisions about its growth and development on a coordinated and consistent basis. It will establish a framework for development within the region, and describe policies, programs, and projects that will encourage and facilitate development that is consistent with such framework. The Plan will help local officials coordinate their decisions so they can anticipate how one decision may affect another.*

### 1.3 WORKING TOGETHER

Framework recommendations build on the recognition that the Region’s communities cannot effectively plan in isolation or independently address important issues. Almost every challenge faced by a locality has a regional dimension. Local decisions and initiatives—economic development, transportation, education, public safety, environmental stewardship, land use, open space and farmland conservation, and housing affordability—influence and are influenced by the actions of other regional actors.

The Framework grows out of a formal agreement entered into by the counties in the Fall of 2002. At the direction of the Erie County Executive and Chairman of the Niagara County Legislature, a Steering Committee was formed and directed to lead an intensive planning and public engagement process. With assistance from County staff and a team of planners led by The HOK Planning Group, the Steering Committee studied regional patterns of growth and development, analyzed County powers and authorities, explored

best practices from across the state and the country, and evaluated alternative scenarios for the Region’s future.

The process involved collaboration with numerous regional entities and close coordination with ongoing planning and economic development initiatives, including the Regional Economic Development Strategy. The process also benefited from intensive engagement with community and regional stakeholders—through interviews and focus groups meetings, a web-based survey, dialogues with civic and community groups, and in large-scale public workshops, the Region’s citizens shared their issues, concerns, and ideas for the future.

*(A regional economic development strategy is being prepared as part of a separate effort. As that effort nears completion, the counties will ensure Framework and emerging economic development strategies are fully integrated and mutually-supportive.)*

### 1.4 HOME RULE CONTEXT

The Framework recognizes both the different forms of government in effect in each County as well as the limits imposed on counties under New York State law. With traditional planning authority granted to municipal government, including the regulation of land use through zoning and land subdivision,

the counties’ direct influence on the region’s development pattern is limited. While the counties review and comment on many local land use decisions, the authority to approve or disapprove proposals is in the hands of the Region’s 64 independent municipal governments—the 3 cities, 25 towns, and 16 villag-

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es in Erie County and the 3 cities, 12 towns, and 5 villages in Niagara County—and the two Indian reservations. For this reason, the Framework’s recommendations focus on ways the counties can exercise their authorities to ensure more integrated and effective approaches to area-wide growth, development, conservation, and reinvestment.

The Framework is not intended to serve as a conventional zoning or land use plan or capital improvement program—recom-

mendations regarding future residential or commercial zoning districts are not a part of the Framework nor are detailed recommendations concerning the extension of public utilities or investments in the transportation network. The Framework, however, is designed to help County and regional leaders make better policy and investment decisions, more effectively leverage limited resources, and provide more consistent direction and useful support to municipalities.

### 1.5 NOTES ON DATA SOURCES

The report draws heavily on land use and development data from the Geographic Information Systems (GIS) of the Erie County Department of Environment and Planning and the Niagara County Center for Economic Development. Additional information was gathered from both primary sources such as the US Census Bureau and US Geological Survey (USGS) and secondary sources such as the Greater Buffalo Niagara Regional Transportation Council, the University at Buffalo’s Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth, Empire State Development’s State Data Center, the New York

State GIS Clearinghouse, and the Library of Congress. The Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth’s State of the Region Report and Western New York Regional Information Network were particular useful sources, providing analyses of relevant data and gateways to additional datasets and studies. Recent reports prepared on behalf of the Erie Niagara Regional Partnership, Buffalo-Niagara Enterprise, the New York State Quality Communities Task Force, and the League of Women Voters Education Campaign on Sprawl also provided background for this report.



## 1.6 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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