

## **TOWN OF CORTLANDT MASTER PLAN**

### **CHAPTER 8: VISUAL QUALITY** **& COMMUNITY APPEARANCE**

*GOAL: Enhance overall visual character by improving the appearance of established residential neighborhoods, commercial centers/corridors, and mixed-use hamlets.*

#### **A. INTRODUCTION**

The visual nature and quality of our community is our most immediate connection to our environment. It is this very nature and visual ambiance that drew many of us to Cortlandt and continues to make our community such a desirable place to live. Protecting and enhancing this visual environment is a complex issue, as it involves the alteration of natural features with the construction of buildings and roads, both publicly and privately owned. The maintenance and enhancement of the visual environment involve important and sometimes controversial planning and administrative issues.

Maintenance and enhancement of the visual environment and community character was one of the single largest concerns reflected in the resident's survey conducted at the beginning of the Master Plan revision effort. It is clear that the importance of these issues is widely acknowledged across the Town.



**Croton Reservoir**

Cortlandt's unique visual and community character includes a combination of forested hillsides and river valleys, farmland, low to medium density residential areas, small hamlets, historic areas and commercial uses associated with major road corridors, the railroad and the Hudson River. Separating the developed areas of the Town are intervening open space lands composed of wetlands and wooded areas and a variety of scenic parkland including Blue Mountain Reservation, Croton Gorge, George's Island, Oscawana Island, Hudson Highlands Gateway Park and Harbour Landing. Other major scenic areas of the Town include the Croton Reservoir and the Hudson River and Hudson Highlands. Preserving the Town's scenic value and improving community character will continue to make the Town an attractive place for residents, businesses and visitors.

The goals and objectives contained in this chapter are two-fold: That existing areas of important scenic value should be protected; and that new development should be compatible with, and/or strengthen the character of surrounding neighborhoods.

## **B. BASE STUDIES SUMMARY**

As identified in the Base Studies, an inventory of scenic resources was conducted to document those areas in the Town of Cortlandt that are of visual significance. The primary scenic vistas worthy of protection are those areas with views of the Hudson River from parklands along the shoreline and from inland higher elevations. Due to the Town's unique regional location in the scenic Hudson River Valley, its parks and open spaces are enjoyed by both Town residents and tourists. As a member of the Hudson River Valley Greenway Communities Council, the Town of Cortlandt has worked to designate a portion of the Hudson River Trail which runs through the Town on its way from New York City to Albany as a Hudson River Greenway trail. In addition, the diverse local topographic provides a variety of vistas of mountains, hills and valleys throughout the Town. One notable area includes lands visible from, and associated with the Croton Reservoir area.

Within the semi-rural and established suburban areas of the Town, most of the roads are lined by a combination of mature trees, stone walls, wooded areas, fields and lawns. Within the last 10 years many of the homes constructed in single-family detached residential subdivisions have a uniform appearance because of limited use of different architectural models or materials. Some of the more recent subdivisions, particularly on lots less than an acre in size, lack trees and dense vegetation which is in stark contrast to the surrounding area. The newer subdivisions typically have relatively uniform lot sizes and setbacks and streets that are wide, compared to older developed areas. The uniform appearance is a result in part of the zoning and subdivision regulations. The commercial areas of Cortlandt (outside the hamlets) are characterized by modern strip development along the major transportation corridors of Routes 6, 9A and 202/35.

Although, recent changes in the Town of Cortlandt Zoning Code requires additional landscaping for new development, the lack of vegetation on older commercial sites along these corridors is further emphasized by “open” parking areas, signs, utility lines and a variety of building styles.

The hamlet areas are characterized by a mix of older residential and small scale, convenience type commercial uses. Commercial zoning changes made in the 1990’s in the hamlet areas included CC, Community Commercial while the commercial corridors are zoned either HC Highway Commercial, HC-9A Highway Commercial (Multi Family) or CD Designed Shopping.

### **C. OBJECTIVES AND POLICIES**

The following objectives and policies are intended to implement the goal of enhancing the overall visual character of the Town and protecting the character of all residential and commercial areas and protecting parklands and open space from development activities that might impact and detract from the visual quality of these resources.

#### **OBJECTIVE: Improve the visual quality of developed areas and preserve historic resources throughout the Town.**

As recommended in the 1991 Master Plan, the Town's Zoning Ordinance was replaced in 1994 with expanded and revised comprehensive standards for lot coverage, building size, buffering, and landscaping standards to promote better visual quality by creating better relationships between building lot coverage, building location, and the amount of area retained in a vegetated or undisturbed state. These standards were established consistent with the character of each zoning district and the uses and activities permitted in each district.

#### **Policy 131: Maintain and Support the Cortlandt Architectural Review Committee (ARC) as a volunteer committee.**

The Architectural Advisory Council was created in 1992 and advises the Planning Board on matters concerning site design and layout through its review of proposed site plans, signage and building elevation drawings for commercial development and multifamily structures. When requested by the approving authority, the ARC will have the responsibility to review the size of a house on a single lot and for cluster subdivision design.

The Town Board should continue to support and maintain its Architectural Review Committee. The Plan encourages the adoption of new regulations to provide for review procedures and architectural design guidelines for the Architectural Review Committee.

**Policy 132: Develop an Architectural, Site and Landscape Design Manual**

Develop an Architectural, Site and Landscape Design Manual (or manuals) to describe ARC procedures, design issues, and a vocabulary for further discussion. The ARC should participate in the development of the basic criteria needed to develop the Architectural, Site and Landscape Design Manual.

The purpose of these manuals would be to provide design guidelines to be utilized by Applicants and their Design Professionals. These manuals should not be developed to dictate limit or restrict any particular design “style”.

The Master Plan Committee recommends that the Town Zoning Ordinance be amended to include the following items:

- Create and Adopt an Architectural, Site and Landscape Design Manual prepared by a professional consultant.
- Create a single lot review committee consisting of internal staff between the divisions of Code, Engineering and Environmental Review.
- Extend the standard time frame from 3 years to 5 years for the maintenance security on subdivision and site plan approvals to provide additional time to monitor site maintenance.
- As a condition of any site plan approval, and in addition to a maintenance security require applicants to provide for long-term regular maintenance of landscaping, buildings, parking lots, lighting, drainage and all other improvements made to a site.
- Provide for continued enforcement staffing and equipment needs to enforce regular site maintenance, including a review and update of fines and penalties.
- As a condition of any site plan approval, require that the applicant designate a “site” representative that will handle and process all inquiries and complaints regarding site maintenance. A violation should be issued for properties that are not maintained properly.
- Incorporate conceptual approval by the Planning Board of site development plans as part of the Planning Board’s Site Development Plan approval process for new development.
- Strengthen the enforcement of the prohibition against the storage of goods or equipment in trailers, box trailers or similar vehicles registered or unregistered, and provide a specific phase-out date in the ordinance to discontinue the keeping of such vehicles, on properties in all commercial and residential districts.

**Policy 133: Conduct a citizen's visual survey to assist in the creation of Architectural, Site and Landscape design guidelines to protect visual quality.**

The Master Plan encourages the Town and the ARC to utilize citizen's input when creating the design guidelines to be used in the creation of Architectural, Site and Landscape design manual.

To that end, the Town is encouraged to conduct a citizen's visual survey which will help gauge citizen preferences with respect to various visual quality aspects of the Town. Citizens' preferences will be determined by comparing and rating photographic images of the community's present visual environment with images of other communities to arrive at recommendations for the desired design of future development.

The images are then translated into a set of design guidelines to be used by applicants/developers, Town officials, and other agencies and persons whose activities have an influence or impact the community's overall visual character. The Architectural Review Committee should work closely with the consultant conducting this survey and should insure that the survey findings are incorporated into the Design Manual(s) proposed above.

**Policy 134: Improve location and design criteria for off-street parking.**



Carbone Building - Route 9A

The Master Plan Committee recommends that the Town Zoning Ordinance be amended to include the following items:

- Provide a direct reference in the Zoning Code of the proposed Design Manual for the design and layout of parking lots under for Site Development Plan Approval. The manual should provide guidance on appropriate types of landscape materials, the use of other screening controls, i.e., fences and berms, and similar design recommendations to improve the aesthetics of parking areas.
- In Commercial and Industrial areas, provide for a sliding scale landscaped setback for parking lots from all side and rear lot lines and in combination with buffer strips. This sliding scale should be based on lot width and lot area.
- In the CC, Community Commercial Districts, provide for a landscaped setback for parking lots from all front, side and rear lot lines in combination with buffer strips where required.
- Enhance the pedestrian environment near parking lots by providing sidewalks, slowing traffic and providing landscaped and attractive barriers between pedestrians and moving traffic.
- Encourage cooperative parking through the use of shared parking lots (eliminating extra curb cuts) where appropriate and creation of regulations and agreements to reduce potential visual impact and the amount of impervious surfaces provided.
- Explore the use of alternatives to impervious (paved) parking lots.
- Provide for more flexible parking regulations in hamlet areas such as shared parking lots in favor of pedestrian connections and less paved surfaces.
- Revise parking requirements to prevent oversized parking lots.

**Policy 135: Encourage improvement to existing pedestrian areas.**

Existing pedestrian areas would be improved through the use of ‘streetscape design’ measures including the consideration of the burying of utilities wherever possible.

There are several areas of Town, particularly those older, more established hamlet areas such as Verplanck, Montrose, Annsville and Van Cortlandtville where there is significant pedestrian use of the roadways and public areas.

The Plan encourages pedestrian use of these areas and supports improvements to pedestrian areas by the addition of sidewalks, bikeways, pedestrian pathways. The Plan also encourages the use of “streetscape designs” such as decorative lighting, benches, signage and other appropriate visual enhancements to pedestrian and public areas. Where possible, provide a buffer between the sidewalk and the road to protect pedestrians.

In addition, the Town should seek to improve the streetscape and street side plantings along E. Main Street (Route 6) and consider the creation of a “Cortlandt Boulevard” where the possibility of a center median would be considered.

**Policy 136: Establish guidelines in the subdivision regulations and zoning ordinance to preserve existing trees where possible, especially on hillsides with steep slopes and within and adjacent to water resources that contribute to the Town's scenic quality.**

The standards for subdivision design should explicitly state that the preservation of wooded areas, hillsides with steep slopes, and within and adjacent to water resources are important to the character of the Town. The Town's Subdivision Regulations (Chapter 265) and or the Zoning Ordinance should be amended to include the following items:

- The removal of any roadside trees of over a specified caliber should be minimized (with the exception of road cuts, driveways and utility lines, as needed).
- Town standards require that new road intersections be located at a point that satisfies required sight distance standards. However, the removal of large trees, stone walls and other historical and environmentally important features should be discouraged.
- Building setbacks should be increased and wooded buffers/conservation easements should be used to separate existing homes from new residential developments and commercial buildings on adjacent property.
- Revise and strengthen the Town's Tree Ordinance (Chapter 283). See Chapter 4 Natural Resources for more details. Revisions should include the requirement that a permit be obtained for any cutting of trees over 12 inches (allowing for normal tree maintenance operations)
- Require a tree survey and a tree replacement formula for all subdivisions and commercial development.
- Establish a maximum percentage of lot area that may be disturbed for lawns; establish a minimum area to remain undisturbed.
- Provide for additional requirements in addition to those already required in the Westchester County Best Management Practices to control soil erosion and sedimentation in all new development in the site plan and subdivision regulations.
- Strengthen the monitoring and inspections of site work including increased penalties and site restoration for violations of Town Laws or approved site development plans.
- Provide general design guidelines for new residential subdivisions that encourage building design that works with the natural topography and features of the land, and avoid significant disturbances to accommodate buildings that are out of character with the natural site.
- Limit significant alterations to the natural topography, which require the introduction of significant retaining walls, which are out of character with the natural environs.
- Preserve old stone walls and associated trees including tree canopies where possible.

**Policy 137: Improve the visual quality and community appearance of existing hamlet areas through public improvements.**

To further strengthen and preserve the visual quality and community appearance of existing hamlet areas the Town should provide for the following:

- Prepare comprehensive streetscape plans for hamlet areas that would serve to guide and coordinate future private and public improvements as they occur.
- Provide for aesthetic and functional streetscape designs by creating/introducing village greens, landscaped areas, sidewalks, street lights and other improvements with linkages to parks and open spaces.
- The Town should develop photometric design standards to ensure that residential areas adjacent to commercial sites are not adversely impacted by glare or impacts from off-site lighting while ensuring that adequate light in the commercial site.
- Continue to provide for adaptive reuse of existing structures, particularly of historic interest, while preserving architectural character.
- Encourage land uses and pedestrian friendly improvements that are village-like and small scale in the hamlet areas.
- Establish a Town wide signage system to identify and promote hamlet areas.

**OBJECTIVE: Identify ways to improve signage throughout the Town.**

The Town's Sign Ordinance was replaced in 1995 with more comprehensive regulations for the use and display of signs. Sign limits and standards were established consistent with the character of each zoning district and the uses and activities permitted in each district. While these regulations have improved standards associated with the size, type, number and location of signs relative to their applicable location in a particular zoning district, the Master Plan Committee seeks to further improve the aesthetic design of these structures. These policies are in addition to the concepts detailed in the 1999 Sign Design Manual prepared to provide guidance to property owners to improve the design and placement of signage as regulated by the Town Sign Ordinance.

**Policy 138: Revise the Sign Ordinance.**

The Master Plan Committee recommends that the Sign Ordinance should be amended to reflect the Zoning Board decisions related to the numerous appeals filed since 1995 and to provide for adequate signage for multi-tenant properties. Our recommendations include the following items:

- ❖ Regulate the use of neon lighting on signs, windows and building facades.
- ❖ Provide for formulas resulting in adequate signage for commercial tenants in multi-tenant properties. Require that property owners and tenants utilize the Sign Design Manual for the design and placement of proposed signage.



- ❖ Encourage and educate homeowners and businesses to better control the use of special sales signs, tag sale signs, banners and window signs.
- ❖ Provide for continued enforcement, including a review and update of fines and penalties.
- ❖ Provide for the uniformity of signs in their design and location at key road intersections in commercial areas.

As required by the Sign Ordinance the Town should pursue having pre-existing non-conforming signs, which do not meet the provisions or standards contained in the Sign Ordinance, either made to conform or be removed within a three (3) year time frame.

**OBJECTIVE: Protect those areas that contribute to  
the visual quality of the Town.**

The following policies are intended to protect the scenic quality of open space and environmentally sensitive lands. Note that open space preservation and associated policies are addressed in Open Space Section of the Master Plan.

**Policy 139: Preserve scenic shore-land areas through the adoption of a Local Waterfront Revitalization Program (LWRP).**

Along the Town's Hudson River waterfront, George's Island and Oscawana Island County Parks are designated Scenic Areas of Statewide Significance (SASS). Other SASS areas in Cortlandt include the entire Camp Smith New York State Military Reservation and Wallace Pond and its environs.

Through the cooperation of various agencies including the Town, County and State, recent large acquisitions of waterfront open space include: Steamboat Waterfront Park, Harbour Landing, and the adjacent Koplring Society lands by the State. These acquisitions expand the possibilities for waterfront access and revitalization of the Town's shoreline

To establish a comprehensive strategy for the protection and improvement of the unique Hudson River coastal area, the Town should prepare and adopt a Local Waterfront Revitalization Program pursuant to the Waterfront Revitalization and Coastal Resources Act of New York State.

**Policy 140: Continue to support the efforts of the Open Space Committee.**

In early 2003, the Town established an Open Space Committee comprised of volunteers for the purposes of evaluating open space parcels within the Town and make recommendations to the Town Board for the acquisition of open space or the purchase of conservation easements on said parcels. The Master Plan encourages the Town to continue to support the efforts of the Open Space Committee.



DiMaria Farm

**Policy 141: Protect scenic roads. (see also Historic Preservation)**

Many roads within the Town exhibit outstanding visual qualities, including vistas, landscapes, vegetation, stone walls and geological features not found on or near other traveled ways. These roads serve as a link to the Town's rural past and provide a unique visual resource for residents to enjoy.

Potential development may threaten to deprive future generations of the cultural and aesthetic opportunities afforded by these resources. Protecting scenic roads will serve to:

- stabilize and improve property values;
- foster civic pride and identity in the Town's appearance;
- preserve some of the remaining rural qualities of the Town's past;
- improve pedestrian safety.

It is recommended that the Town of Cortlandt provide for a scenic roads protection through the creation and adoption of a Historic/Scenic Road Ordinance which would include, among others, the following:

- A procedure for the Town Board to identify and designate certain roads within the Town as scenic roads;
- Designation criteria such as dense forest and rock outcrops at the road's edge, scenic vistas, a rural or historic past and old stone walls;
- Regulations to protect designated scenic roads such as required buffers, public improvements and a system of reviews and permits from the Town.

Once adopted, the Historic Road Ordinance should be extensively utilized by the Architectural Review Committee in their review of all applications.

**Policy 142: Protect scenic vistas**

Due to local topographic changes, a variety of scenic vistas of mountains, hills and valleys are provided throughout the Town. Potential development may threaten and change the character of these visual resources.

It is recommended that the Town create and adopt a Scenic Vista Protection Ordinance that would include, among others, the following:

- A procedure for the Town Board to identify and designate certain scenic vistas within the Town to be protected;
- Designation criteria such as scenic quality, viewshed and scenic characteristics to be evaluated;
- Regulations to require that all new development applications evaluate potential impacts on scenic vistas.

**Policy 143: Conduct educational and promotional activities to further protect, enhance, and preserve visual quality and community appearance.**

In order to further protect, enhance and preserve visual quality and community appearance the Town of Cortlandt should:

- ❖ Create incentives for cleaning up litter through methods such as “Adopt a Road Program” and sponsor and encourage citizen clean up days.
- ❖ Promote tourism by publicizing Cortlandt’s location as the Gateway to the Hudson Valley and encourage recreational enjoyment of the Town’s open spaces and unique unencumbered access to the Hudson River.
- ❖ Sponsor free educational and promotional activities to make the public aware of the importance of design in the community and to provide design guidance.
- ❖ Promote the establishment of local homeowner and business associations to encourage enhanced visual character of properties and neighborhoods.
- ❖ Continue to expand and maintain landscaped areas on public lands throughout the Town and provide funding from the Town’s operating budget to continue maintenance.

