

# Creating a Green Neighborhood in the Southern Region of Albany, New York

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## Concept of a green neighborhood and policy goal

Today's environment, filled with fast driving and air pollution, compromises the health, safety, and welfare of humans, which leads people to increased isolation<sup>1</sup>. We must redevelop the natural environment, get rid of pollution, and restore the friendship and mutual understanding within our communities by building green neighborhoods. A neighborhood, or a geographically localized community, harmoniously connects residents. Green neighborhoods have sustainable environmental systems and harmonious connections among residents in the community, ensuring people a high quality of life<sup>2</sup>. As Jane Jacobs describes in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*<sup>3</sup>, a green neighborhood meets the needs of people's activities, values and interactions. In such an environment, like a network, people may access public facilities such as schools, hospitals, post offices, and libraries through safe and self-enclosed sidewalks; the streets are filled with plants, gardens, resting benches, barbeque tables, and playing fields so people are connected<sup>4</sup>. Creating green neighborhoods allows people to control pollution, save energy, increase employment, decrease crime rates, develop friendships, and utilize

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Emission Data. *Energy Information Administration*. [cited 12 January 2008]. Available from <http://www.eia.doe.gov/environment.html>

<sup>2</sup> Definition of neighborhood. *Definitions of neighborhood on the Web*. [cited 12 January 2008]. Available from [http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&defl=en&q=define:neighborhood&sa=X&oi=glossary\\_definition&ct=title](http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&defl=en&q=define:neighborhood&sa=X&oi=glossary_definition&ct=title)

<sup>3</sup> Jacobs, Jane. Foreword. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. [cited 12 January 2008]. Available from <http://www.walksf.org/essays/janejacobs.html>

<sup>4</sup> The American Prospect. *Sustainable Cities*. [cited 12 January 2008]. Available from [http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=sustainable\\_cities](http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=sustainable_cities)

public facilities. Its benefits may extend beyond the neighborhood to neighboring districts, cities, the country, and even the world.

### **Plan for revitalizing historic southern area of Albany**

The southern area of Albany, the capital of New York State, urgently needs revitalization into a green neighborhood. Since its discovery in 1609, this region has embraced business, industry, and western civilization<sup>5</sup>. The southern area has since evolved into three districts: the core South End, the Schuyler Mansion named for renowned Revolutionary War General Philip Schuyler<sup>6,7</sup>, and Historic Pastures, totaling 5 square miles (Figure 1a)<sup>7</sup>. 16% of the lots sit vacant among a total of 4,435 house units, and 60% of the houses were built before World War II<sup>6</sup>. The median house value is relatively low at \$71,000. As of 2006, the regional population, estimated at 7,840 people (50% black) had been declining at a 4% rate this decade. Owner-occupied houses make up only 23% and half of these owners are over age 50<sup>7,8</sup>. High poverty and crime rates add to the critical importance of revitalization. City planners have devised *The Capital South Plan (CSP)* focusing on the South End (Figure 1b)<sup>9</sup>; they intend to stabilize, energize, develop the neighborhood, and link it with the city. However, creating a green

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<sup>5</sup> City of Albany. *History of Albany*. [cited 11 January 2008]. Available from <http://www.albanyny.org/Government/CityHistory.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> Albany First Ward. *Albany NY Architecture*. [cited 11 January 2008]. Available from <http://www.albanyfirstward.org/albany-ny-architecture.php>

<sup>7</sup> Colonial Albany Social History Project. *Schuyler Mansion*. [cited 11 January 2008]. Available from <http://www.nysm.nysed.gov/albany/loc/schuylermansion.html>

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Census Bureau data. *Albany community profile*. [cited 12 January 2008]. Available from <http://www.epodunk.com/cgi-bin/genInfo.php?locIndex=65#Cens>

<sup>9</sup> An existing comprehensive plan. *The Capital South Plan*. [cited 11 January 2008]. Available from [http://www.albanyny.org/files/Government/Development\\_Planning/planning\\_zoning/CapitalSouthPlanFINAL--8-9-07compress.pdf](http://www.albanyny.org/files/Government/Development_Planning/planning_zoning/CapitalSouthPlanFINAL--8-9-07compress.pdf)

neighborhood does not seem to be its ultimate goal. On this basis, my plan strengthens the idea of building this area into a green neighborhood.

First, my plan aims to initiate environmental and energy conservation while preserving Albany's unique historical and cultural traits. CSP ensures preservation of the historical Howe library, Schuyler Mansion, St. Ann's Church, and many old houses<sup>9</sup>. The poorly conditioned walls, windows, doors, ventilation, pipe systems, and outdated

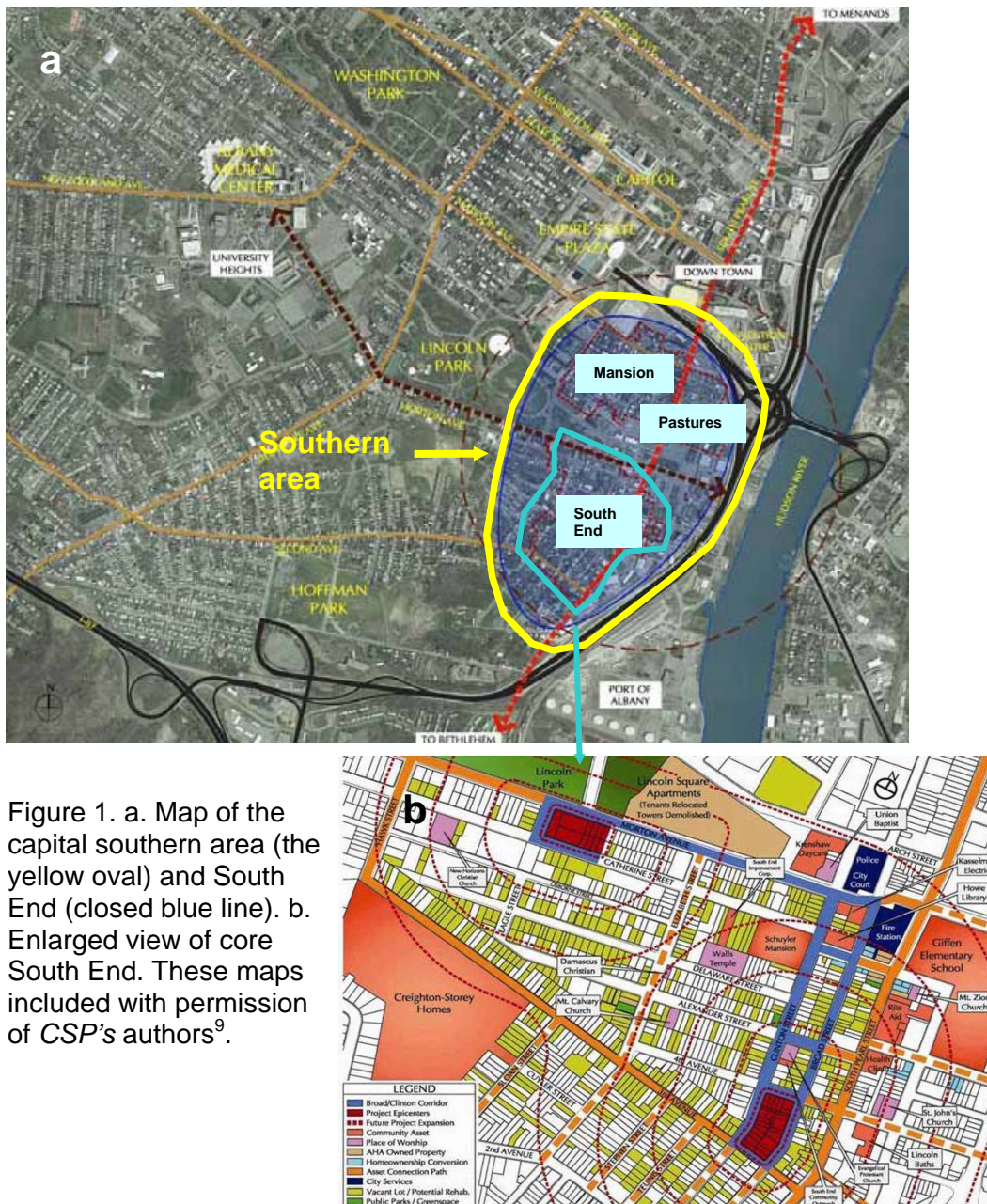


Figure 1. a. Map of the capital southern area (the yellow oval) and South End (closed blue line). b. Enlarged view of core South End. These maps included with permission of CSP's authors<sup>9</sup>.

construction materials of these buildings cause high energy consumption. My plan not only preserves these buildings' appearances, but also utilizes new energy-saving heating/cooling systems with high standard insulation through their walls, windows, and doors. Historical buildings and homes must pass energy saving tests before residents put them back in use<sup>10</sup>.

Second, the key to creating a green neighborhood involves increasing land capacity in the residential area. *CSP* points out that the city maintains vacant lots by charging homeowners \$200 annually<sup>9</sup>. Keeping these vacant lots hinders investors and developers from coming into this area. Crime at these locations threatens everyone's safety and the debris causes air pollution. My plan will build two large apartment complexes at the locations filled in by the vacant lots: one between the east side of Lincoln Park and the triangle's center, the other halfway between the center and the very south end<sup>9</sup> (Figure 2). Developers will pay for the construction costs since most of the

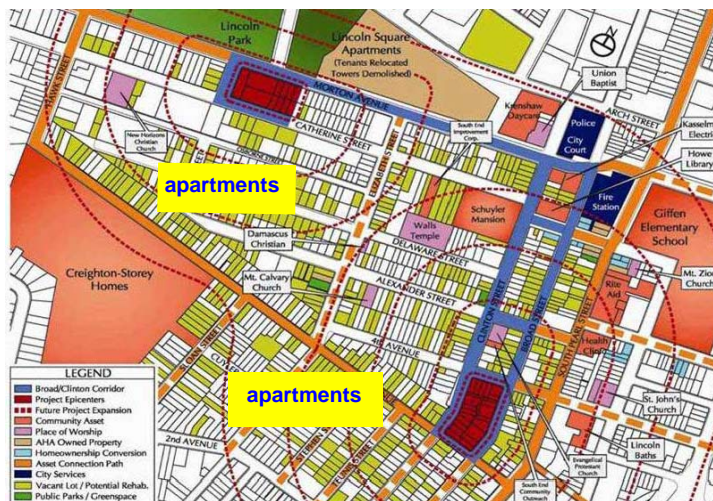


Figure 2. The two yellow boxes indicate planned new apartment buildings. The background map is used with permission of *CSP*'s authors in the Albany City Planning Department<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Standards of high performance buildings. *ANSI Invites Accredited Standards developers to Participate in High Performance Building Initiative*. [cited 11 January 2008]. Available from <http://aec.ihs.com/news/ansi-high-performance-building.htm>

residents cannot afford the expense, and the city will reward the developers with the land saved as a result of the creation of high capacity residential buildings. The developers can use the emptied land to erect office buildings to attract more regional business.

Third, my plan places public facilities, including schools, grocery stores, and community centers, within walking distance of the new apartment complexes. I also plan to build one kindergarten and one health clinic inside each apartment complex to provide employment opportunities. The public transportation system makes major stops at the apartment buildings to increase running efficiency, save energy and reduce pollution. CSP suggests renovating the Giffen Elementary School, currently located at the northeast corner of the South End, largely populated by recycling factories, but few residents. The poor location forces some residents to travel more than ten blocks, relying on vehicles. My plan moves the school to the central location of the South area near the apartment buildings (Figure 3)<sup>9</sup>. CSP recommends creating a community center near Giffen School's current location. I suggest relocating the center near the new site of Giffen School, as well as the new apartment buildings, rendering the center convenient to all (Figure 3, blue circle). CSP proposes developing the field next to the Department of

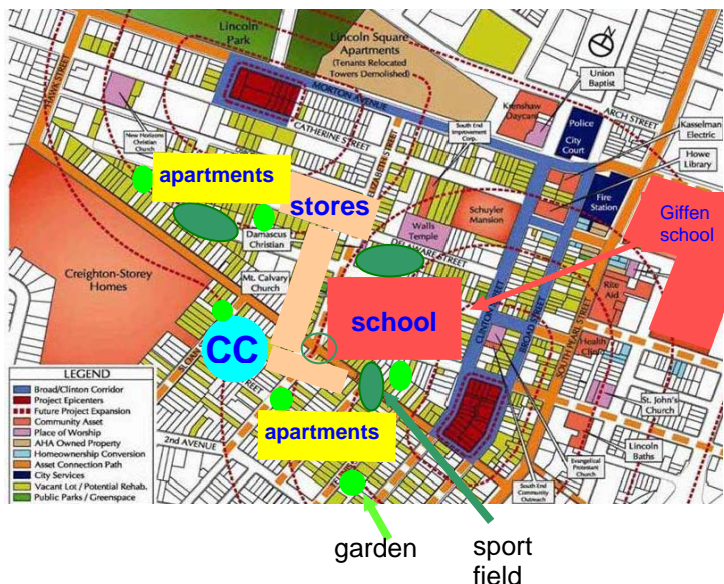


Figure 3. The red box indicates the new location of the Giffen elementary school. The blue circle designates the location of a new community center (CC). Pink boxes are the locations of stores, post-office, laundry, and clinics. Dark green circles are the places of playground and sport fields, Light green circles indicate gardens, BBQ benches, and rest places. The background map is used with permission of Albany City Planning Department<sup>9</sup>.

Motor Vehicles located north of the Mansion, which would create jobs and provide services outside the residential area. My plan creates a medium-scale combined retail store near the new community center (Figure 3, yellow-boxed area), so residents can conveniently make one trip to the school, community center, and store.

Fourth, my plan renovates roads and plants more trees, flowers, and shrubs, unlike *CSP*, which advocates building lawns in vacant lots. Preserving lawns demands a higher cost of labor, more money and more water than maintaining gardens, trees, and plants without polluting water with inorganic fertilizers<sup>11</sup>. My plan limits paved roads and parking lots, and uses water-penetrable material instead of concrete for any necessary pavement to allow rain runoff. It renovates sidewalks, builds playgrounds, and encourages neighbors to put BBQ grills, instead of fences, between houses, thereby improving relations among neighbors while enhancing the safety and harmony of the neighborhood.

Fifth, a waste separation system would regulate each household. All recyclable garbage, indecomposable and industrial waste should be treated outside the city. Currently, eight waste disposal and recycling plants inundate the southern area, some quite close to the Giffen School. These recycling sites seriously threaten the quality of air and life in the neighborhood. On garbage collection days, loosely packed garbage obscures sidewalks and floats freely on rainy days, damaging the environment and image of this neighborhood. Waste disposal presents major problems in the southern area, but has not been sufficiently addressed in *CSP*. My plan sets up garbage storage in each of

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<sup>11</sup> Green living. *How to Protect Your Neighborhood Land* [cited 11 January 2008]. Available from <http://www.care2.com/greenliving/protect-your-neighborhood-land.html>

the new apartment buildings. *Per* the Albany “Waste Collection Rule”<sup>12</sup>, the containers separate wet and dry, recyclable and non-recyclable, and burnable and non-burnable garbage. Households outside the apartment complexes will also have these containers. The current recycling and disposal factories will be relocated to a non-residential area. Some of the current waste disposal sites, which will be defunct under my plan, may be awarded to the developer who brings advanced waste technologies and facilities into the new development.

### **Implementation of my plan**

The existing *CSP*, adopted in July 2007, provides the essential strategies to renovate and revitalize Albany’s southern region based on the data analyses. *CSP* provides an administrative and organizational network to improve the southern area economically, but places no strong emphasis on environmental improvement. My plan acknowledges the most important environmental issues while promoting the revitalization that results from a green neighborhood.

Implementation of my plan would improve the southern region economically, socially, and environmentally. Residents will live in a much more convenient environment, as high capacity apartments will rise next to the shopping center, school, and community center, decreasing the need for transportation. My plan controls pollution from waste, recycling processes, and the debris in vacant lots, while promoting citizens’ welfare and safety following the removal of vacant lots. Walkways, well separated from traffic lines and residents, will connect neighbors in the improved environment.

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<sup>12</sup> Waste collection rules in Albany. *Refuse "Garbage" Collection*. [cited 11 January 2008]. Available from <http://www.albanyny.org/Government/Departments/GeneralServices/TrashRecycling/RefuseCollection.asp>  
[x](#)

Meanwhile, gardens, plants, and playgrounds will inspire the residents to stay outdoors. The development of local business and opening schools, kindergartens, retail stores, and health clinic will provide employment opportunities. The developer-rewards strategy helps both the low-income households and the city's overall development.

The successful implementation of my plan requires obtaining public and administrative participation, as well as the cooperation of city planning officials. We must educate residents about the vital necessity of this plan and show them the personal benefits that it will bring.

I will send my plan and a meeting request to city planners. I will assist the planners by posting the information online so that residents may access it. Via local media, such as the *Times Union* and various TV channels, we will explain my new proposal to the public. Prior to the plan's finalization, we will hold a neighborhood representatives' meeting to hear more public voices, which may result in better ideas to improve the plan further. Finally, my proposal will be submitted to city officials to obtain their approval.

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