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Widen Main St.? Community Had Other Ideas, and Thrived

By DENNIS GAFFNEY

HAMBURG, N.Y. — How did this Rust Belt village of 10,000 people resurrect itself from a 30-year slide? It started with a road.

Twelve years ago, the State Transportation Department proposed improving U.S. Route 62, the village's mile-long Main Street, by adding another traffic lane, removing parallel parking and narrowing sidewalks. When Susan Burns, a lifelong Hamburg resident, saw the plan, she remembers asking, "What are you doing with the trees and the people?" She said she was told by state officials, "We have to get the traffic through."

Ms. Burns feared that the road expansion might be the fatal blow to the village, just south of Buffalo, which was already knocked down by the collapse of the area's steel industry and the opening of a nearby mall. The village that many had once compared to the idyllic Bedford Falls in the 1940s movie "It's a Wonderful Life" worried that it was sliding toward Pottersville, or worse yet, a ghost town.

Ms. Burns frantically started calling her friends in town, and a citizens' group, the Route 62 Committee, quickly formed. Soon after, Dan Burden, a national advocate for walkable communities, was invited to visit.

"You can't bring back a village," Mr. Burden told the villagers, "without bringing back a street."

Inspired, the committee created a "community design alternative" for the road, and villagers voted for their plan over the state's proposal by four to one, and the state agreed to it.

That alternative was finished in 2009, and Ken Kuminski, the Transportation Department's project manager for the reconstruction, showed it off on a recent morning. He started at one of four new roundabouts.

"We used to have major accidents where drivers were trying to beat the lights," Mr. Kuminski said. Roundabouts force traffic to

move much slower. “Accidents in them need a tow truck,” he said, “not an ambulance.”

In fact, all of Hamburg’s Main Street was redesigned to slow vehicles, a technique known as traffic calming. Two lanes, instead of the three that had been planned, were built, and the lanes’ width was shrunk from 12 feet — highway-size ribbons that invite drivers to go fast — to 10 feet. That created more room for trees; on-street parking, which is good for businesses; and “safety lanes,” which provide room for drivers to open car doors safely and also serve as de facto bicycle lanes.

In the two years after the reconstruction, car accidents on the new road dropped by 66 percent and injuries by 60 percent. For Mr. Kuminski, the project’s big lesson was “bigger is not better.”

A safer street is also pedestrian-friendly — which is what the citizens’ committee, including Laura Hackathorn, a village trustee who grew up in Hamburg and now owns a ladies boutique on the route, wanted. She also gave a tour of Main Street, but from a pedestrian’s viewpoint.

She noted the crosswalks that were added midblock and sidewalk extensions into the road, making it easier to cross the street. Ms. Hackathorn stopped in front of the Coyote Cafe and pointed east up Main Street toward a cozy corridor created for strollers and outdoor diners.

“If you build a place for cars, it will be a gathering place for cars,” Ms. Hackathorn said. “If it’s built for people, it will be a gathering place for people.”

Over four recent years, business owners, inspired by the new road, spent a total of \$7 million on 33 building projects. The number of building permits rose from 15 in 2005 to 96 in 2010 and property values along Route 62 more than doubled over the same period. In 2012, the village’s Main Street was placed on the National Register of Historic Places, which brought tax incentives that villagers hope will lead to still more development.

“This is about the quality of place, which is about the quality of life,” said Paul Becker, Hamburg’s special-projects coordinator. He said Hamburg did not focus on attracting large employers to town, but “on doing small things for small businesses.”

In fact, national chain stores are hard to find here. Many businesses, like the Hamburg Palace, a theater opened in 1926, and Braymiller’s Bowling Lanes, which opened in 1942, look as though they were lifted from the Bedford Falls movie set. On her tour, Ms. Hackathorn carried before-roadwork photos of Main Street buildings with tacky facades from the 1960s and 1970s. Recent

renovations have shorn them of their ugly casings.

Almost all the restored buildings have been rebuilt with big storefront windows, once a mainstay of Main Streets.

Large windows are required by the village's architectural design guidelines, which encourage two-story buildings with stores at street level and housing above. "We want lights on after 5, because then Main Street is alive," Ms. Hackathorn said.

The upgraded Main Street also has inspired a burst of civic activity, including a movie-in-the-park night, a village-garden walk, a street-music festival, a progressive dinner called Hamburg Bites and a soapbox derby that began this summer.

The village's redevelopment has also attracted new residents, including Faith and Dan Reiford, who were out recently for a trip to the bank and a cup of coffee with their 2-year-old daughter and their cairn terrier. After checking out other Buffalo suburbs, they bought their first home in Hamburg two years ago.

"We liked the idea of being able to wake up and walk around," Ms. Reiford said. "Western New York is synonymous with the past, and not in a positive way. Hamburg is planning something progressive and putting their planning into action."

The new Hamburg also drew back Norm Zintz, 63, who was laid off from the nearby Bethlehem Steel plant in the 1970s, and left town soon after for the Midwest. He came back for visits, "liked what I saw," and returned last year after he retired. Three days a week, he walks along Main Street behind Big Norm's Dogs, a pushcart serving hot dogs and sausages.

"It was like a ghost town," Mr. Zintz said, remembering the Hamburg of the 1970s. "Now they've made it a pleasure to walk through the village. It's like Bedford Falls all over again, and everyone knows it's a wonderful life."