

# Context Sensitive Hamburg

"Context Sensitive Design" (CSD) refers to roadway standards and development practices that are flexible and sensitive to community values.

This supports TDM and Smart Growth implementation. CSD is increasingly applied by transportation planning agencies.

... Todd Litman, Economist, Victoria, British Columbia

Context Sensitive Design is extra-ordinary street design embracing complex needs of people, business, community life, respecting history and culture of place – all at a time when vehicles demand bigger, wider, speedier systems.

To build a street to the multiple needs and principles of people and place takes courage, coordination, cooperation, perseverance, patience, openness, directness, knowledge, ability, wisdom and charisma and charm.

Context Sensitive Design represents the end of an era that is all about power, ego, self-righteousness, specialization and a build-fast mentality. It is the opening of an era centered and forged upon sharing, caring, passion, engagement, generalization, a forging of partnerships, a listening to the needs of the many, and a responding to the broad issues of building not a street, but a community.

Walkable Communities, Inc. proudly lists the small Western New York (Buffalo area) village of Hamburg as one of the most nation's communities working to achieve the highest level of context sensitivity design. (population 17,000).

In the middle of October, 2001 the Village of Hamburg sent their mayor and town administrator to the New York State Pedestrian Conference in Glens Falls, New York. Following a keynote presentation that I gave the mayor and city administrator related that they were facing a major reconstruction of their downtown by the New York Department of Transportation that was not sensitive to their needs. I offered and was later asked to come and conduct a walking audit of Hamburg in early 2002.

In January I conducted a two-day walking audit, reviewed elements of the state plan to rebuild Highway 62 (four separate roadway segments) conducted brief meetings and a series of brief training sessions on tools and public process to construct roadways highly sensitive to commercial development, preservation of neighborhoods, main streets, basic and advanced pedestrian needs. Key players attended all sessions. The village staff, a small number of citizens, staff of the New York Department of Transportation, and their consulting firm, CHA, all took part.

It was an intriguing project – all roadway sections were to be rebuilt without expanding lanes, adding sidewalks, landscaping and other enhancements. Some minor access management needs were being addressed, as well as ADA issues, improved street lighting, drainage and other general roadway improvements. So why had the community sought my advice?

The roadway design did little or nothing to decrease speeding, increased decades old corner turning radii, took out major on-street parking, as well as setting forth other bells ringing about the standard open house style public process. Indeed, the open house sessions were already scheduled, and major designs were underway well before significant community input was offered. The recession weary rust-belt town was alarmed.

By the end of the visit plans were underway by key village leaders to convince the New York Department of Transportation to amend their contract and bring in Walkable Communities, Inc. to conduct a 5-7 day charrette.

In record time Village leadership made a pitch and won the favor of the New York DOT to amend its scope and bring on a full scale charrette that would become a community alternative to the consultant developed plan. This plan would be an alternative offered under the NEPA (environmental review) process. The contract was awarded in a record 60 days.

Meanwhile the leadership of Hamburg organized a steering committee of 25 citizens and staff to oversee marketing, organizing and effectiveness of the charrette....to be held just 40 days later. The team met every Saturday morning up to the final charrette presentation (April 17<sup>th</sup>), and is now expanding its role to carry out the charrette community voice.

The Village had earlier hired Jan Van Huizen to oversee and strengthen coordination with the project. Jan, a mother of two young children, served as a critical connector, maven and salesperson (read Malcolm Gladwell's "The Tipping Point") ... assembling a wide diversity of town players to take central roles in the charrette.

The village of Hamburg did its homework. They brought out the troops. Many diverse players came to most parts of the charrette. The fire administrator took part, transit took part, the school administrator, the city and state snow plow operators took major roles (Hamburg is in the deep snow Buffalo area).

In the end the community is choosing 4-6 roundabouts, slowing traffic on Highway 62 to 30 mph through application of these tools and other traffic calming features, such as medians and refuge islands, new street trees the length of the four roadway segments, squaring up some intersections, adding plazas at others. They are providing 8-10 new mid-block pedestrian crossings, many dozens of curb extensions (at most intersections). The Village seeks a linkage to a high bluff overview of the community's greatest visual asset, 18 Mile Creek and the surrounding conservation district.

Responding to the business owners' request, the New York DOT is retaining most existing parking and is adding new inset on-street parking. They are also urging major landscaping and tree plantings, and a total rebuild of all sidewalks. Most supportive, and a key to the sensitivity success, the New York DOT is strongly considering adding a truck bypass ... a thought not in the original scope. This by-pass allows all intersections to be more compact and pedestrian friendly. All intersections still allow standard size

semi tractor trailers to pass through, and most accommodate oversize semi's (WB-67), while turning movements by these vehicles are highly restricted.

A critical post-charrette meeting with town officials, the consultant, Walkable Communities team members (Michael Wallwork and Sue Newberry) and the New York DOT gave guidance to proceed with pre-construction designs for all of these design elements and themes.

The ten-days of highly coordinated work to draft a report, rework the corridor CADD files to meet these objectives and test out each new tool was completed in time for Dan to present an hour long closing to the charrette on April 17<sup>th</sup>. The Village residents (250 participants and other stakeholders added some new and clarifying thoughts, then ratified the plan to a strong consensus. They also gave the New York Department of Transportation and their prime consultant, CHA a strong, almost standing ovation, applause.

Some in the New York DOT labeled this project the true test of context sensitivity for the state. They sent folks from their context sensitive design staff, the workshop procedures staff, their state roundabout design team, and others. They are lending our team a knowledgeable landscape architect, who knows plant materials able to survive salt laden snow slush.

### **Hamburg's Values**

In the opening public event, when I had people list their values on post it notes and then paste them on the wall, the top value was "government responsiveness" ... the first of its kind in any town where we have asked people to list their community values. This is a strong endorsement of the new movement toward context sensitive design

In short, context sensitive design, as exhibited by the New York DOT on this project, requires high levels of work, innovation, coordination, quick action, trust in the public and facilitation team, and commitment to test and retest every notion.

Hamburg, New York is a very critical patient on the teetering edge, slipping into greatness or oblivion. In my closing I challenged Hamburg and state to see the rebuild of Highway 62 as not only is a means to protect its colorful past (Home of the first Hamburger) while rebuilding its heart.

Hamburg is an example of how to do work with a partnership of a major state agency, a consultant firm, a skilled public participation facilitation team and a local town ready to face and embrace its destiny. Many New York towns are ready to leave the rust belt economy of the past. To do this they must invest heavily in their key streets -- not just with funds, but with passion, cooperation, coordination, compassion, ownership, involvement and sensitivity.

We closed this session with two stellar and timeless statements provided to us by Jan Van Huizen -- first by always insightful Helen Keller; the other by President, Governor, Statesman and New York's own son, Theodore Roosevelt. These are both excellent insights needed if the challenges and fear of building better, more sensitive, roadways are to be built.

*"Be of good cheer.*

*Do not think of today's failures, but of the success that may come tomorrow. You have set yourselves a difficult task, but you will succeed if you persevere; and you will find joy in overcoming obstacles. Remember, no effort that we make to attain something beautiful is ever lost."*

*...Helen Keller*

*It shall be in the future enough to say of any man 'He was connected to the digging of the Panama Canal' to confer the patent of nobility upon that man, " Roosevelt told his sweating engineers. "From time to time little men will come along to find fault with what you have done...but they will go down the stream like bubbles, they will vanish; but the work you have done will remain for the ages."*

*Theodore Roosevelt*