

A. INTRODUCTION AND PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Town of Babylon (“the Project Sponsor” or “the Town”) is proposing to design and construct the Wyandanch Intermodal Transit Facility (“the Project”) in the hamlet of Wyandanch, Town of Babylon, Suffolk County, New York. The Project includes seven components: 1) construction of a new structured parking garage, 2) creation of new public open space with new and relocated bus stops, 3) establishment of a drop-off and pick-up area, 4) creation of a new street network to provide access to these facilities, 5) implementation of off-site roadway and streetscape improvements along Straight Path, 6) implementation of drainage improvements, and 7) installation of signage and way finding elements.

The “Project Site” is the area where the Wyandanch Intermodal Transit Facility is proposed. The Project Site is located in downtown Wyandanch adjacent to the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) Wyandanch station. To implement the Project, the Project Sponsor proposes to acquire three tax parcels on the Project Site, which are owned by Suffolk County and by two private parties, and to use a portion of Acorn Street (which is owned by the Project Sponsor) and a portion of a property owned by MTA.

In the context of other recent Town initiatives, the Project Site is located within a larger urban renewal area designated by the Town of Babylon in 2008 and recommended for redevelopment in *The Urban Renewal Plan for the Revitalization of Downtown Wyandanch* (April 2009) (i.e. “Urban Renewal Plan”), which was adopted in May 2009, as part of the Town of Babylon’s *Final Wyandanch Downtown Revitalization Plan* (May 2009) (i.e. “Revitalization Plan”). The Project Site was also identified in the Revitalization Plan as part of a larger “strategic site” recommended for transit-oriented development.

Downtown Wyandanch is lacking a central destination for the community and visitors but maintains good access to transit. The LIRR Wyandanch station is located in the center of downtown; Suffolk County Transit bus service has two bus stops within the train station vicinity; and local taxis frequent the train station and surrounding parking lots to transport commuters to and from the area. These transit activities move residents and visitors between New York City and Wyandanch, Wyandanch and Ronkonkoma as well as connect people to adjacent towns and villages, Fire Island ferries, large commercial malls, and colleges. The Project will capitalize on the availability of existing transit and create a central hub to synchronize connections between these modes of transportation. The Project will provide a place for residents and visitors to gather or wait comfortably for public transit; improve the current poor state of pedestrian, vehicular, and bicycle safety; better coordinate different modes of transportation; and increase parking capacity on weekdays. The increased parking capacity will serve to alleviate the existing overcrowding in the LIRR station parking lots which, in turn, currently increases local roadway congestion.

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As a central location where people can conveniently access and/or transfer between different modes of transportation, the Project will serve the community and its residents by providing more travel opportunities, encouraging economic development in downtown, creating a new plaza for community access to public open space, and improving pedestrian, bicycle, and vehicular safety.

The Town is requesting funds administered by the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT), Federal Transit Administration (FTA) among the funding sources for development of the Project. Therefore, FTA and the Town have prepared this Environmental Assessment (EA) in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) 42 USC §§ 4321, et seq., and its implementing regulations as set forth in 23 CFR Part 771, 40 CFR Parts 1500-1508, and 49 CFR Part 622. This EA was also prepared in accordance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended; Section 4(f) of the U.S. Department of Transportation Act of 1966; Executive Order 12898, Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations; and other applicable Federal statutes, rules, and regulations.

The Town, as a New York State municipal corporation, must comply with the New York State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA), Article 8 of the New York State Environmental Conservation Law, and its implementing regulations (6 NYCRR Part 617) in connection with developing, approving, or funding the Project. This EA, together with the accompanying Environmental Assessment Form (see **Appendix 1**), will be used by the Town and any other agencies or municipalities with SEQRA obligations to identify, analyze, and document the potential environmental impacts of the Project and to make determinations or findings consistent with the requirements of SEQRA.

This chapter provides an overview of the Project's background and current planning context and identifies the Project's purpose, the needs that the Project is intended to address, and the Project Sponsor's goals and objectives for the Project.

B. PLANNING OVERVIEW

The vision for revitalization of the hamlet of Wyandanch focusing development around the LIRR Wyandanch station to create a downtown destination began with *Wyandanch Rising*, a community-based comprehensive plan for the hamlet that was adopted in 2004. In 2005, consistent with the goals and visions set forth in *Wyandanch Rising*, the Town dedicated newly installed lighting along Straight Path, marking a significant milestone in Wyandanch's downtown revitalization initiative to "foster economic development and beautify the hamlet of Wyandanch." Other recent Town-implemented Straight Path improvements include traffic medians, tree plantings, and new waste receptacles and planters.

In 2008, as part of the overall revitalization effort for downtown Wyandanch, the Town of Babylon designated an area along both sides of Straight Path in downtown Wyandanch, including the Project Site, as an Urban Renewal Area. The Town of Babylon's *Final Wyandanch Downtown Revitalization Plan*, completed in May 2009, set forth the Urban Renewal Plan for the downtown Wyandanch Urban Renewal Area. It also incorporated a New York State Brownfield Opportunity Areas (BOA) Program Step 2 Nomination and a Generic Environmental Impact Statement (GEIS) to assess the potential impacts of adoption of the Urban Renewal Plan by the Town. The plan developed as the result of this effort aims to revitalize and redevelop

downtown Wyandanch into a pedestrian-friendly and safe community, with a new mix of uses that improve the quality of life for residents and visitors.

New York State's BOA program, which is administered by the New York State Department of State, is designed to assist communities to foster redevelopment and return dormant and blighted land into productive use. As part of the BOA program, Wyandanch has been designated a "Spotlight Community" by Governor David Paterson's Smart Growth Cabinet, one of only three in New York State.

In coordination with these studies and plans, the Town completed a feasibility study funded by the FTA for development of a transit facility at the LIRR Wyandanch station—*Wyandanch Intermodal Transit Facility Feasibility Study* (June 2008). The study included recommendations for a community-based transit plan, new structured parking, a new transit facility, downtown revitalization, enhanced pedestrian safety, and creation of public spaces—the subject of this EA.

The implementation strategy recommended in the Revitalization Plan divided the Urban Renewal Area into seven separate zones, referred to as "strategic sites," and made specific recommendations for each of those zones (see **Figure 1-1**). The Plan recommended initial investment on the site identified as "Strategic Site A," which extended along the east side of Straight Path from Acorn Street to approximately Nicolls Road (including the Wyandanch Intermodal Transit Facility's Project Site).

Strategic Site A was identified as the initial catalyst that would set the stage for the other goals identified in the Revitalization Plan. As the area immediately north of the Wyandanch station, Strategic Site A was identified as a "northern gateway" to Wyandanch's central business district and therefore as crucial to recasting the image of the core and creating a more vibrant, successful downtown. The Revitalization Plan identified a recommended implementation plan for Strategic Site A that included construction of an intermodal transit center near the Wyandanch station, and creation of a new street grid across Site A to create parcels with a shape and size conducive for development. Ultimately, the Revitalization Plan identified redevelopment on Site A with transit-oriented development, including housing, retail space catering to commuter and office populations, and commercial office space.

Since completion of the Revitalization Plan, the Town of Babylon has been proceeding with the steps necessary to implement the redevelopment of downtown Wyandanch. A new form-based zoning code is currently being prepared for the downtown area to guide the redevelopment. In addition, the Town is in the process of acquiring properties where initial development will occur, and the Town intends to solicit proposals from developers for those parcels beginning in 2011. In addition, the Town Board, in coordination with the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), has been awarded funds for assessing the feasibility of extending the local sewer district infrastructure to Wyandanch, and has completed the design for sewers along Straight Path, with construction scheduled to begin in the summer of 2010 and to be completed in late 2011 or early 2012.

C. STATEMENT OF PURPOSE AND NEED

PURPOSE OF WYANDANCH INTERMODAL TRANSIT FACILITY PROJECT

The Project has multiple purposes, all related to revitalizing downtown Wyandanch as a component of the larger downtown revitalization strategy that has been initiated by the Town of Babylon. These purposes include the following: 1) providing additional parking capacity for LIRR



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Figure 1-1
Wyandanch Downtown Revitalization Plan Strategic Sites

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commuters; 2) consolidating parking to allow additional, non-parking-related transit-oriented development near the LIRR Wyandanch station; 3) creating an intermodal hub that provides an opportunity for connections between the various modes of transportation, including taxis, vehicles, pedestrian, bus, and rail and provide a downtown destination; 4) encouraging redevelopment and investment in the vicinity of the Project Site through a strategic street network that allows for adequately sized development parcels and that will serve the proposed intermodal transit facility by providing improved traffic circulation; and 5) improve physical, aesthetic, and safety conditions along the Straight Path corridor and within downtown Wyandanch. These actions together will help to stimulate economic redevelopment within downtown Wyandanch, consistent with the Town's planning efforts.

NEED FOR THE PROJECT

Overcrowded parking lots, increased LIRR and Suffolk County Transit ridership, no central transit collector location, a lack of a defined downtown and public gathering place, poor vehicular and pedestrian safety, and lack of investment in the area has led the Town to consider the development of the Project with the intermodal facility at the core.

TRANSPORTATION NEEDS

Downtown Wyandanch is lacking a defined downtown hub and key location where multiple transit modes can operate in a centralized manner to provide better service to area residents and visitors. Instead, the LIRR Wyandanch station is surrounded by large surface parking areas that operate beyond their capacity on weekdays. As a result, vehicles park illegally within the parking lots, on adjacent roadways, and within parking lots that serve other uses (e.g., the retail shopping center located at the corner of Straight Path and Acorn Street). In addition, taxis utilize the lots, as well as adjacent roadways, to drop-off or wait for arriving passengers. This creates congestion on local roadways and adversely affects the character and economic vitality of downtown Wyandanch.

Based on projected growth in the region, it is anticipated that ridership on LIRR and Suffolk County Transit, a bus service provider that maintains a stop at the LIRR Wyandanch station, will increase, placing even more stress on the overcrowded parking facilities and adjacent streets. This condition poses safety concerns for pedestrians, bicycles, and vehicles that utilize downtown.

The proposed structured garage will help to better coordinate various modes of transportation and alleviate overcrowded parking conditions while improving unsafe conditions on local roadways. In addition, the Project includes relocating the existing Suffolk County Transit bus stop, and incorporating its new northbound location into the proposed intermodal transit facility project site, which will also help to better coordinate modes of transportation. The Town of Babylon has discussed this element of the Project with Suffolk County, which has indicated its support of this modification.

There are currently limited access routes in downtown Wyandanch in the area close to the Wyandanch station. The area immediately north of the station has large tax parcels that are not divided by roadways. Straight Path (a four-lane north-south roadway) experiences heavy vehicular volumes, particularly truck traffic that currently dominates downtown and discourages pedestrian and bicycle use. Straight Path also experiences significant flooding. In addition, the intersection of Acorn Street and Straight Path, close to the train station, is a problematic intersection due to heavy truck traffic. Moreover, safety is comprised by lack of pedestrian

connections over the railroad tracks and degraded sidewalk and street conditions including cracking or crumbling, inadequate drainage, and incidents of sidewalk parking by heavy trucks.

The new street grid proposed on and near the Project Site will help to eliminate truck traffic from the problematic intersection and allow train commuters to move freely between the station and platform and their parked vehicles without having to cross a heavily traveled, high-speed truck route mid-block without traffic control. The proposed roadway and streetscape improvements will help to provide traffic calming measures along Straight Path that will help ensure pedestrian and traffic safety, encourage walkability, and improve the aesthetics of the roadway. The new street network is also necessary to support the proposed intermodal facility, by enhancing traffic circulation and providing an alternate route for trucks and other traffic. The proposed drainage improvements, together with sustainable site design techniques for future development in the area, will also reduce the potential for flooding.

ECONOMIC VITALITY

In addition to transportation concerns, downtown Wyandanch has suffered from declining economic stability with a deficiency in commercial activity and development, high vacancy rates, dilapidated storefronts, and a general lack of neighborhood identity. Wyandanch needs a catalyst to stimulate growth and healthy activity in downtown to overcome a past that has been defined by drugs and violence.

The Project will be an important first step to fulfill the goals of the *Wyandanch Downtown Revitalization Plan* by removing incompatible uses in the core downtown area and replacing them with more appropriate uses—in this case, a parking garage, public plaza, and new street grid north of the Project Site that together will be a critical first step and catalyst in the future redevelopment of downtown Wyandanch.

The large acreage devoted to commuter parking in the heart of downtown Wyandanch and the large tax parcels undivided by roadways deprive the community of use of these large parcels to accommodate transit-oriented, mixed-use development that will add commercial and residential uses to downtown while stimulating the local economy and tax base—all goals of the Town's previous planning studies. By promoting transit-oriented development, the Town anticipates new residential and mixed-use development in the area that in addition to redefining neighborhood character will help to increase property values in close proximity to the LIRR Wyandanch station. Redevelopment and revitalization strategies will translate to new businesses, an increase in both property and non-property related tax dollars, the creation of jobs for construction and operation of new businesses, and an overall greater investment in the community. In addition, the Project will also address the current shortage of open spaces in the downtown area by creating a new public gathering place that will provide a sense of place for downtown as well as offer residents and commuters a place to sit, reflect, and participate in community activities.

D. GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Based on the transportation, safety, community, and economic development needs in downtown Wyandanch, as well as the findings of transportation and municipal plans and studies, the following goals and objectives have been identified for the Project:

ACCOMMODATE FUTURE DEMAND AND ENCOURAGE ACCESS BY MASS TRANSIT

- Provide intermodal connections to encourage a mode shift from automobiles to mass transit and facilitate transfers between bicycle, pedestrian, car, bus and train commuters;
- Improve pedestrian connections and safety throughout downtown;
- Implement management strategies to enhance the efficiency of existing and proposed parking facilities;
- Enhance parking capacity to meet projected parking shortfalls; and
- Provide facilities to encourage bicycle use.

ALLEVIATE VEHICULAR CONGESTION AND IMPROVE SAFETY

- Improve vehicular and pedestrian safety along the Straight Path corridor, in the vicinity of the LIRR crossing and station in particular, and to the north;
- Enhance circulation patterns and traffic calming measures, with emphasis on relieving congestion and promoting redevelopment;
- Separate trucks from vehicular and pedestrian traffic; and
- Improve passenger pick-up and drop-off locations at train station.

SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN DOWNTOWN WYANDANCH

- Provide for a central gathering space in the downtown area;
- Improve aesthetic conditions in the area of the LIRR Wyandanch station;
- Create a street grid of regular blocks near the Project Site that is conducive to future transit-oriented development.

MINIMIZE ADVERSE EFFECTS ON THE ENVIRONMENT

- Minimize surface parking and convert to more efficient and productive land use;
- Create public plaza with new trees and landscape features;
- Reduce congestion in the surrounding neighborhood;
- Enhance pedestrian safety; and
- Reduce effects of vehicular traffic on air quality and noise.

E. RELATIONSHIP OF THE PROPOSED PROJECT WITH FEDERAL INITIATIVES ENCOURAGING SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

In June 2009, the U.S. Department of Transportation, Department of Housing and Urban Development, and EPA formed the Interagency Partnership for Sustainable Communities with the goal of improving access to affordable housing, increasing transportation options, and reducing transportation costs, while protecting the environment in communities nationwide.

The Partnership aspires to supporting initiatives that create livable communities, which will result in improved quality of life for all Americans and create a more efficient and more accessible transportation network that serves the needs of individual communities. Fostering the

concept of livability in transportation projects and programs will help America's neighborhoods become safer, healthier and more vibrant.

In support of these goals, the Partnership has adopted six guiding "livability principles" to be used to coordinate federal transportation, environmental protection, and housing investments at each of the respective agencies. These principles are as follows:¹

1. *Provide more transportation choices.* Develop safe, reliable, and economical transportation choices to decrease household transportation costs, reduce our nation's dependence on foreign oil, improve air quality, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and promote public health.
2. *Promote equitable, affordable housing.* Expand location- and energy-efficient housing choices for people of all ages, incomes, races and ethnicities to increase mobility and lower the combined cost of housing and transportation.
3. *Enhance economic competitiveness.* Improve economic competitiveness through reliable and timely access to employment centers, educational opportunities, services and other basic needs by workers as well as expanded business access to markets.
4. *Support existing communities.* Target federal funding toward existing communities—through such strategies as transit-oriented, mixed-use development and land recycling—to increase community revitalization, improve the efficiency of public works investments, and safeguard rural landscapes.
5. *Coordinate policies and leverage investment.* Align federal policies and funding to remove barriers to collaboration, leverage funding and increase the accountability and effectiveness of all levels of government to plan for future growth, including making smart energy choices such as locally generated renewable energy.
6. *Value communities and neighborhoods.* Enhance the unique characteristics of all communities by investing in healthy, safe and walkable neighborhoods—rural, urban or suburban.

FTA has identified a number of ways that transit projects being funded by FTA might enhance the livability of a community, consistent with the Partnership's livability principles. These include:²

- Transit-oriented development (TOD), which creates sustainable mixed-use communities near transit facilities with high-quality walking environments. TODs reduce automobile congestion and create a sense of community.
- Transit enhancements, such as landscaping, bus shelters, bicycle access and storage, signage, and public art.
- Bicycle and pedestrian-related enhancements connected to transit facilities.

The Wyandanch Downtown Revitalization Plan represents the type of livable community and sense of place that the Partnership strives to encourage throughout the United States. Further, it is an example of the integrated approach to sustainable redevelopment and revitalization called for by the Partnership's livability principles, including for TOD housing, enhanced

¹ Source: <http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/partnership/index.html>, accessed February 16, 2010.

² Source: http://fta.dot.gov/publications/publications_10964.html, accessed March 3, 2010.

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transportation facilities and connectivity (the Intermodal project and improvements to traffic circulation), and the new sewer improvements.

The Wyandanch Intermodal Transit Facility represents the transportation improvements necessary to bring the overall redevelopment to fruition. Consistent with the FTA's livability elements as well as the Partnership's livability principles, the Project will contribute the important first step in a larger TOD plan, and itself will provide transit enhancements as well as bicycle and pedestrian-related enhancements. Overall, the Project is an excellent example of the type of sustainable, livable community that is the goal of the Partnership. *