

Downtown Revitalization Initiative In Focus

The Role of the DOS Brownfield Opportunity Area Program in the Success of DRI Communities



Downtown
Revitalization
Initiative
In Focus — A SERIES

Governor Kathy Hochul's Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI) is transforming downtown neighborhoods for all New Yorkers. Recognizing that companies are increasingly seeking to relocate and invest in vibrant, walkable downtowns in an effort to attract and retain a talented workforce, DRI is an investment to improve the vitality of urban centers across New York State.



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*A once-contaminated industrial site (bottom) is now being re-purposed to revitalize the Oswego waterfront with housing, retail and commercial space (below, during construction; top, final rendering) at **Harbor View Square***



A successful DRI is not created in a vacuum. DRI applications, plans and projects are usually built on previous community planning and public engagement processes—including the Department of State (DOS) Brownfield Opportunity Area (BOA) program.

The Cities of Batavia, Oswego and Rome exemplify the critical role that the BOA program can play in a successful DRI community.

But first, what is a BOA? A BOA plan supports the sustainable redevelopment of formerly contaminated areas of the state—primarily in underserved and disenfranchised communities. DOS provides grants to communities and not-for-profits to develop plans and projects to redevelop and revitalize these areas. Once the planning process is complete, the community then applies to the Secretary of State for a final BOA “designation”—which brings with it additional project support, such as an enhanced redevelopment tax credit and priority funding from certain state programs.

The BOA planning process builds a solid foundation on which to base a DRI because the plans, strategies and projects are derived from extensive public outreach and engagement. This allows the community to create a truly bottom-up, home-grown vision for its future.

In many DRI communities, the DRI and BOA target areas and strategies overlap with one another, as is the case in Oswego, Batavia and Rome.

OSWEGO

The City of Oswego’s DRI area is almost entirely contained within its BOA boundary. This has allowed the city to use DRI funding for two critical downtown BOA housing projects—Harbor View Square and East Lake Commons.

Harbor View Square

Harbor View Square has been re-developed into 75 units of mixed-income apartments, combined with retail and office space, just a stone’s throw from the waterfront. Its history presents a case study in the ill effects of de-industrialization in Upstate Legacy Cities. But this story has a happy ending.

The former Flexo Wire wire manufacturing and distributing company sat vacant and abandoned for years. Like so many other industrial buildings in Upstate cities, the site contained significant contamination. Without support from the DRI,

BOA, Department of Environmental Conservation brownfield clean-up program and Housing and Community Renewal, the site would have remained an eyesore to this day. Now, it's a central component of the city's efforts to re-populate and revitalize the waterfront.

East Lake Commons

Prior to its demolition and redevelopment, the building formerly known as Mid-Town Plaza was an eyesore. With \$2 million in DRI funding, a developer tax credit from the BOA program and support from Housing and Community Renewal, the newly-named East Lake Commons project is transforming this vestige of 1960s urban renewal into a mixed-use anchor on the East side of downtown, with 71 apartments and retail and commercial space.

BATAVIA

Batavia basically used their BOA plan as the framework for their DRI application and subsequent DRI Strategic Investment Plan. As a result, several projects recommended in the BOA plan are now being funded through the \$10 million DRI grant.

Ellicott Station

The Ellicott Station project, for example, was designated as a Strategic Site in the city's BOA plan—which means it's a high-priority project. The project is re-developing and re-purposing a formerly-contaminated brownfield property into 51 mixed-income residential units, four commercial units and a brewery/restaurant. Ellicott Station is receiving \$425,000 in DRI funding.



The **Ellicott Station Mixed-Use Project**, before and after (rendering)

Newberry Place Lofts

Newberry Place Lofts is another BOA/DRI project in Batavia. The project gets its name from the JJ Newberry Five-and-Dime store, which occupied the building for over 60 years. Built in 1881, the building also housed furniture-makers, undertakers and various small businesses. But the building sat vacant for several years.

Now, DRI funding is breathing new life and new uses into the building as it moves into the next chapter of its storied history. The first floor of the building will be renovated for the Eli Fish Brewing Company and the Fresh Lab restaurant incubator. And four market rate apartments are being developed on the second floor.



Once a sad reminder of failed Urban Renewal in the 1960s, **East lake Commons** is revitalizing the East side of the Oswego River (rendering)



The **Newberry Place Lofts** mixed-use project. Clockwise from top: Historic Newberry Building; New Eli Fish Brewing Company exterior; Eli Fish Brewing interior

City Centre/Harvester 56 Theater

And then there's City Centre. City Centre is a downtown mall that has not lived up to its potential. With its suburban style buildings and design, this vestige of 1960s urban renewal has frustrated the city's revitalization efforts for decades ... until, that is, the DRI came along.

Upgrades and improvements to the City Centre concourse are transforming this uninviting space into a vibrant public place. The improvements are both functional and aesthetic—new floor tiles; low-level pole lighting; new entrances from Main Street; façade improvements; interior painting; and roof upgrades. The new-and-improved concourse will be able to host micro-retail kiosks and other events that will bring new vitality to City Centre.

The City Centre project will also create Harvester 56 Theater—the new home for the Batavia Players, a local non-profit community theater group. The new location will provide an additional 70 seats, as well as space for retail/concession, offices, costumes and a dance academy. And it's right across the street from two DRI projects discussed above—Newberry Place Lofts and the Eli Fish Brewing Company.

Nothing like beer and theater to liven up a downtown!



Above, City Centre before improvements; below, rendering of completed City Centre and Harvester 56 Theater

Assembling Layers of Funding to Redevelop City Centre

Several state and private programs have converged to make City Centre work:

- **DRI—\$1 Million**
- **BOA Pre-Development Grant—\$193,000**
- **Empire State Development Strategic Planning & feasibility Study—\$20,000**
- **National Grid Urban Center/Commercial District Revitalization—\$40,000**
- **Historic Preservation Developer Tax Credit**
- **BOA Developer Tax Credit**

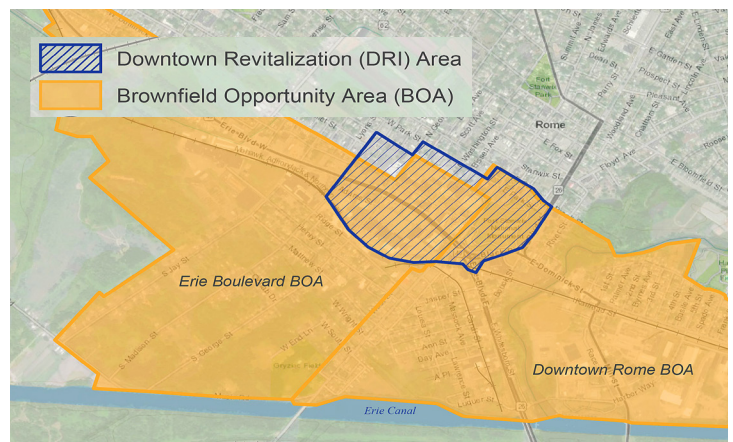
ROME

Unlike Batavia and Oswego, Rome's BOAs (the city has two) are not encompassed completely within its DRI boundary. But that doesn't mean they're not inter-connected. Quite the contrary...

The Rome DRI downtown area overlaps with, and is wedged between, two very successful and high-performing BOA areas—the Rome Downtown BOA and Erie Boulevard BOA (see overlay map). The three areas support and reinforce one

another by creating a seamless link from downtown to the waterfront. This connection is key to the city's cultural and historical heritage as an Erie Canal community.

So how is Rome weaving the pieces of the BOAs and the DRI together to spark downtown revitalization? To answer that question, we need to take a close look at three DRI projects identified by the BOAs—Capitol Theatre Complex; Project Blue Crab; and the Downtown and Waterfront Wayfinding system.



How Rome BOAs and the DRI intersect

Capitol Arts Complex/Capitol Theatre

Rome is home to the Capitol Arts Complex, which is in the Erie Boulevard BOA plan. The Capitol Arts Complex, formerly Capital Theatre, is being developed and modeled after the Proctors Theatre in Schenectady. The Complex includes a large performance and movie theatre, a dance studio, and two small screens that show both current releases, independent films, and former box office movies. The Capitol is the heartbeat of the emerging Arts District and is further supported by the REACH (Rome Entertainment Art Culture and History) Center, Fort Stanwix National Monument, and several music studios and small main street businesses.

As part of the DRI, Rome also created a Business Assistance & Public Art Fund. (Note that they combined “business” and “art” in the name—which just goes to the fact that art contributes to economic development.) The Public Art Fund is devoted to art that will be installed publicly throughout the DRI area, with priority given to an already-established West Dominick Street Arts and Culture District, which includes the Capitol Arts Complex. Eligible projects include paintings, murals, landscapes, earth-works, sculptures, statues, monuments, photographs, drawings and collages.

Project Blue Crab/Complex 3

Project Blue Crab is a massive new advanced manufacturing facility on the former Rome Cable brownfield site, which was identified by the community as a priority project in the Erie Boulevard BOA plan. The project is the revitalization capstone to a decade-long community-led brownfield redevelopment campaign.

Efforts to redevelop Project Blue Crab galvanized in 2017 when the community and the BOA team began developing a conceptual plan for the site. The fundamental goals of the plan are to re-establish a clean manufacturing district on a former brownfield; attract new investment; and provide expansion opportunities for local manufacturers; and expand employment opportunities in the urban center near housing, shopping and transportation alternatives. The project includes the completion of a \$10 million brownfield remediation and restoration effort on a critical parcel—what’s known as Complex 3.

Meanwhile, a back-story was unfolding. The Cold Point Company occupied an existing manufacturing center in the West Rome Industrial Park. But after an acquisition and corporate restructuring, the company considered moving outside of the City to increase jobs and production. Enter the DRI...

With \$900,000 from the DRI to redevelop Project Blue Crab, Cold Point decided to re-locate to Complex 3 and stay in



*Rome’s **Capitol Theatre** has once again become an anchor for the arts and downtown vitality.*

the city. The DRI effectively reversed the decades-long trend of companies leaving the city—and the State!—by making a downtown brownfield site viable and attractive to an expanding industry. A tremendous reversal of fortune! And a testament to the combined efforts of both the BOA and DRI programs.



*Master Plan for **Project Blue Crab/Industrial Park***



***Project Blue Crab** under construction*

The project will retain over 30 jobs and create another 30 over the next 3 years. And the business will move into a downtown location close to restaurants, services, entertainment and pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure that employees could take advantage of at lunch or after hours—a positive change from the typical industrial park setting.

So the BOA program created momentum through successful planning, clean-up, site preparation and adjacent re-development. And the DRI swept in to finish the job with the full revitalization and re-development of Complex 3.

Downtown/Waterfront Wayfinding and Signage

But no DRI project should be selected in isolation from the surrounding community and transportation system. So the DRI funded a wayfinding and signage system that will help vehicles and pedestrians navigate the area more safely and easily. This project fulfills the Downtown and Waterfront Wayfinding goal developed through the Downtown BOA planning process.

Wayfinding signage will have a cohesive, context-sensitive design to highlight the downtown area. Signs will target specific user groups—vehicular signage designed to be

readable by a moving vehicle, and pedestrian signage designed to be viewed by people walking, running or riding bikes through the city. Kiosks will be located at high pedestrian traffic areas and will include a map and a corresponding attraction list. And the parking signs are designed to easily direct visitors to the best nearby parking options.

Industrial re-development, connectivity and wayfinding intersect in these three projects to fulfill the combined visions of both the DRI and the BOA plans—to create a vibrant downtown, focus on job growth, and create public spaces that are enjoyable, connected, and memorable. □



**Office of Planning
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**Downtown
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