Introduction

Positioning Preservation Buffalo Niagara to accelerate preservation outcomes in Erie and Niagara Counties

Since its founding in 2010 with the merger of two preservation organizations, Preservation Buffalo Niagara (PBN) has steadily expanded its mission, grown its professional competencies and staff, and become a credible and active participant in community revitalization efforts. With this strategic plan, it asserts and defines the values it holds, the work it intends to undertake or plan for over the next three years, and the vision it has for the future of the region.

Preservation has a strong track record in the region with many impressive wins. The City of Buffalo’s locally and nationally designated districts, for example, have proven to be racially and economically diverse, incredibly resilient, and are reliable generators of economic growth and job creation. Unfortunately, traditional preservation approaches have not always served all residents. Large scale encroachments and persistent disinvestment have destroyed historic fabric and displaced residents. The history and contributions of indigenous and minority community members have often been marginalized or wholly excluded.

With this plan, PBN commits itself to reforming traditional preservation practices, addressing their inequities, and to expanding their reach. In the conduct of its work and in its own organizational affairs, PBN will demonstrate that historic preservation can be fully representative and that saving historic resources of all kinds can celebrate the region’s diverse history, catalyze economic development, support environmental sustainability, advance social justice, and contribute to community health and wellbeing.
PBN has long aspired to be a “full service” preservation organization engaging in education, advocacy, technical assistance, and direct interventions to save and steward historic resources in a five-county region. The strategic planning process identified and assessed PBN’s expansive agenda of projects, programs, and initiatives -- some 20 discrete activities in all. It also looked at staff and Board operations and capacity, as well as PBN’s reputation and financial position. These were all viewed with an eye toward diversity, equity, and inclusion. The investigation found that the sheer number and range of initiatives has undermined PBN’s ability to be as inclusive, equitable, and effective as it aspires to be.

PBN commits to realigning its work to advance the principles it has set forth in this plan; to center equity and inclusion standards in its work plan; and to carry out its mission and vision more effectively. It defines its primary service area as Niagara and Erie Counties and will focus its work over the next three years in the following four strategic areas:

1. Move more explicitly toward direct action to save places
2. Go deep and long on the East Side and in Niagara Falls
3. Put preservation in the hands of the people
4. Steward and support PBN’s staff and Board

1. PBN believes it has a role to play in creating a more diverse, equitable, inclusive, sustainable, and accessible community. All its programs, policies, and projects will be aligned to meet these objectives.

2. PBN’s current Board members, staff, funders, and partners are ready for the organization to make a proactive shift in its focus and priorities. PBN commits itself to getting the right people in the room and will devote a considerable amount of time and resources toward developing relationships, and building out and diversifying its base of support, financial and otherwise.

3. To be effective, attract funding, and sustain its work long term, PBN will align its efforts around a prioritized set of strategic focus areas and a defined service area concentrated in Niagara and Erie Counties.
Strategic Focus Areas

1. Move more explicitly toward direct action to save places

In recent years, PBN has gained respect, credibility, and support for those aspects of its work that are contributing directly to neighborhood stabilization and community revitalization. These programs include its East Side Commercial Building Stabilization Fund, Historic Home Loan Fund, Technical Services, Sacred Spaces Assistance Program, Tax Credit Workshops, Preservation Receivership Program, and the 72 Sycamore Rehabilitation Project.

While PBN will continue to advocate for strong preservation policies, programs, and funding, it will make an intentional shift toward direct action that saves historic places. It will bring tangible tools, expertise, and solutions to the table. It will work diligently to cultivate and steward relationships that move beyond transactional project-based partnerships toward long-term collaborations based on trust and mutual benefit.

This shift in focus will necessitate realigning, postponing, or halting work in other areas to be determined by the staff and Board. It will require substantial Board and staff time for building and stewarding relationships and to secure increased unrestricted support for the organization.

When PBN does continue to engage in education, training, tours, and research activities, they will be in service of specific initiatives and achieving identified goals. PBN will still be expected to work in partnership with other organizations to advocate for projects and policies, but it will take less of a leading role. An engagement policy to be developed by staff will help PBN develop a guide for decision making going forward.
Strategic Focus Areas
2. Go deep and long term on the East Side and in Niagara Falls

Recent events, federal and state investments, and growing public awareness suggest that the time is now, and perhaps long overdue, to direct preservation programs and approaches to the most underserved and chronically struggling portions of our cities. Locating PBN headquarters at the Eliza Quirk House at 72 Sycamore Street is a consequential first step.

Current direct intervention activities, as detailed above, will be emphasized, coordinated, and distributed for maximum impact on East Side revitalization initiatives including to support the East Side Avenues Project and the Michigan Street African American Heritage Corridor (MSAAHC). This approach also opens the door to non-traditional partnerships and funding sources.

In addition, current PBN supporters, even if they do not live on the East Side or in Niagara Falls, can be enlisted to see themselves as part of this important initiative. Most citizens are eager to be part of the solution and finding ways to make them feel invested will pay off mightily.
Strategic Focus Areas
3. Put preservation in the hands of people

PBN will become a student of the communities it wishes to serve, learning from residents to determine needs and priorities, securing partnerships, and meeting community members where they are.

It will develop and test ways to bring traditional preservation expertise, programs, and resources, as well as unconventional tools, approaches, and funding to the table. It will assist property owners, renters, and community advocates to document and celebrate history, and save and steward the places they care about most.

Recognizing that every building still standing is a preservation victory, PBN will find ways to celebrate preservation progress to date. This can be seen as a block-by-block approach or even “saving Buffalo one landmark at a time.” Such an initiative could be built out to focus on different neighborhoods over time.
PBN seeks to center equity, inclusion, accessibility, and justice in its work, but that requires significant time and intention which has not always been afforded non-profit advocacy organizations. In the absence of such time and intention, organizations end up continuing to serve and be supported by their existing audience and are unable to attract more diverse personnel, Board members, or funders.

PBN will take the time to steward relations, build partnerships, and engage in work that is meaningful to communities of color, indigenous communities, and the region’s newest arrivals.

It will commit to organizational practices that support the health and success of staff: fair and transparent compensation, benefits, and work/life considerations; reasonable goals and performance measures; professional development and health and well-being opportunities; clearer lines for advancement; as well as time set aside for program evaluation, and debriefs on wins and losses.

It will extend such considerations to its Board members, making their volunteer contributions personally fulfilling, and consequential for the organization.
Here's to the Next Three Years
Recap and Conclusion

With our new Strategic Plan, PBN commits to reforming traditional preservation practices, addressing their inequities, and expanding their reach.

We will demonstrate that historic preservation can be fully representative and that saving historic resources of all kinds can celebrate the region’s diverse history, catalyze economic development, support environmental sustainability, advance social justice, and contribute to community health and well-being.

This plan does not change PBN’s mission or vision. Rather, it hones and sharpens our focus to better tackle the challenges facing our communities and enable our team to carry out our mission and vision more effectively.

Special Thanks

We spent much of 2022 deeply enmeshed in this strategic planning process, which would not have been possible without our Board of Directors, Project Advisory Committee, and supporters in the community. Capacity-building funding for this project was provided through PBN’s participation in the East Side Avenues program.

Led by Susan West Montgomery, our process involved equity audits of all PBN’s existing programs, interviews with external community members to assess PBN’s reputation and impact, internal interviews with volunteers, staff, and members of the community who already stand alongside PBN in our work, and in-depth working sessions with our Project Advisory Committee.

We are deeply indebted to the those who gave their time to serve on our Project Advisory Committee, which included a mix of community volunteers and PBN Board members. We thank them for their dedication, thoughtfulness, and eagerness to create change in our community. We are proud to stand alongside you and work with you!