

Proposal for Victorian Storefront Overlay (VSO) Report

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Executive Summary

Bellefonte Borough, known for its Victorian charm and rich architectural heritage, faces a critical challenge in maintaining a vibrant local economy while addressing market trends such as e-commerce and remote work that have significantly changed community needs. Currently, the Central Business District (CBD) and Waterfront Business District (WBD) prohibit first-floor residential uses, resulting in an excess of ground-floor commercial space and high vacancy rates with storefronts.

Proposal: The Victorian Storefront Overlay (VSO)

- **Purpose:** Retain first-floor commercial requirements in the most historically and economically significant blocks along High Street, while allowing flexibility for first-floor residential use outside these designated areas.
- **Scope:** The overlay encompasses three blocks on High Street, two blocks in the CBD, and one block in the Waterfront District—core corridors that define Bellefonte’s Victorian identity and commercial heart.
- **Goals:**
 - **Preserve Bellefonte’s Historic Character** by protecting key storefronts and ensuring continued commercial presence where it matters most.
 - **Reduce Vacancies and Stimulate Growth** by permitting first-floor residential use outside the VSO, helping fill underutilized spaces and adapting to modern housing demands.
 - **Promote Adaptive Reuse of Historic Buildings** so that owners can reinvest in aging structures, preserving unique architecture while meeting new market needs.

Key Benefits

1. **Economic Revitalization:** More flexible zoning can attract new residents. New residents increase tax revenue, are potential customers to local businesses, and increase the demographic stability of a community.
2. **Enhanced Community Vibrancy:** Filling vacant spaces with shops, services, or homes boosts foot traffic, safety, and quality of life for residents.
3. **Architectural Preservation:** Allowing for buildings to have the highest economic use ensures historic buildings are maintained.
4. **Fiscal Responsibility:** Converting vacant storefronts into functional spaces promotes tax base growth, reduces blight, and leverages private investment rather than relying solely on public funds.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Victorian Storefront Overlay is a balanced approach to preserving Bellefonte’s historic core with a

Need for the Victorian Storefront Overlay (VSO)

Historic Significance of Bellefonte

Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, is distinguished by its Victorian architecture, which gives the town a unique character and a strong sense of history. The Bellefonte Historic District—listed on the National Register of Historic Places—features diverse styles such as Georgian, Italianate, Queen Anne, and Classical Revival. Some buildings, including those designed by Anna Keichline (Pennsylvania’s first registered female architect), highlight the town’s architectural heritage. These structures not only reflect Bellefonte’s past but also attract visitors, foster community pride, and anchor the borough’s identity.

Current Challenges

1. High Vacancy Rates in Ground-Floor Commercial Spaces

Despite Bellefonte’s historic charm, the Central Business District (CBD) faces a significant surplus of retail space— 5.54 to 5.76 times more than retail space needed for the entire borough. This oversupply contributes to high vacancy rates, leaving many historic storefronts underutilized and vulnerable to neglect. With neglect, the community risks losing these historic buildings completely.

2. Shifts in Retail and Office Use (E-Commerce and Remote Work)

Consumer behavior has changed drastically due to online shopping, reducing foot traffic in traditional retail areas. At the same time, the rise of remote work has decreased the demand for conventional office spaces. These trends strain existing commercial zones, increase vacancies and limit economic activity.

3. Adapting Zoning to Modern Needs

The Nittany Valley Joint Planning Commission’s Regional Comprehensive Plan (which Bellefonte Borough is a member) notes that vacant and abandoned properties are a blight to the community, underscoring the need for proactive measures. Bellefonte must align its zoning regulations with current economic realities to prevent further decline, stimulate investment, and preserve its architectural heritage.

Goals of the Overlay

1. Preserve Historic Charm

The VSO would concentrate the requirement for ground-floor commercial use within the most historically significant blocks—preserving the look and feel of Victorian-era storefronts that define Bellefonte’s identity.

2. Revitalize Key Commercial Corridors

By designating three blocks on High Street, two in the CBD, and one in the Waterfront Business District as part of the overlay, Bellefonte can prioritize vitality in these areas. This focus ensures that commerce, tourism, and local culture remain strong where they matter most.

3. Encourage Productive Use of Surplus Space

Outside the overlay, first-floor residential use becomes permissible. This change eases the pressure of an overabundance of commercial zoning and helps fill vacant spaces with new residents, reducing blight and supporting local businesses.

4. Balance Economic Growth and Heritage Preservation

The VSO aims to modernize zoning in response to retail and office trends, while still safeguarding Bellefonte's distinct historical character. The overlay ensures that essential commercial storefronts remain active and architecturally authentic, even as the borough adapts to a changing economy.

By implementing the Victorian Storefront Overlay, Bellefonte can proactively address vacancy issues, adapt to emerging market trends, and retain the historic essence that continues to define the borough's appeal.

About the Proposed Victorian Storefront Overlay (VSO)

Description

The Proposed Victorian Storefront Overlay (VSO) covers a stretch of **three blocks along High Street**—Bellefonte's historic thoroughfare—from **High and Allegheny** to **High and Spring**, continuing to **High and Water**, and ending at **High and Potter**. All properties on **both sides of High Street** within this range are included, representing the core of commercial activity in downtown Bellefonte. This area lies within portions of the Central Business District (CBD) and the Waterfront Business District, both of which currently allow various commercial uses and prohibit first-floor residential use. Under the proposed overlay, these key blocks would retain the requirement for **ground-floor commercial activity**, preserving the traditional storefronts and maintaining High Street's historic character.

Key Features of the Overlay

1. Preservation of First-Floor Commercial:

Properties within the VSO must maintain a commercial presence on the ground floor, ensuring the continuation of Bellefonte's vibrant street-level retail and service offerings.

2. Flexible Residential Zoning Elsewhere:

Outside the overlay's boundaries, property owners would gain the option to use first-floor

spaces for either residential or commercial purposes, helping address vacant storefront issues and respond to evolving market trends.

3. Focus on Historic Character:

By defining a clear overlay zone, the VSO encourages architectural consistency and storefront design that complements Bellefonte’s Victorian heritage.

Overlay Purpose

1. Concentrate Commercial Activity:

The VSO guarantees that **key, highly visible blocks** maintain commercial on the first floor, supporting the vitality of Bellefonte’s main commercial corridors.

2. Adapt to Modern Needs:

While designated blocks along High Street uphold a traditional storefront requirement, the remainder of the CBD and Waterfront Business District can adopt residential or mixed-use ground floors, acknowledging shifts in retail and office demand.

3. Preserve Historic Identity:

High Street and downtown Bellefonte are known for their **rich Victorian architecture**, including Italianate and Queen Anne buildings. The overlay helps protect these defining characteristics by requiring appropriate ground-floor uses and storefront designs in the town’s most historically significant areas.

Applicability

The Victorian Storefront Overlay applies to any building located within its defined boundaries, identified by **street frontage on West High Street**. Qualifying properties must adhere to the VSO’s requirement for commercial use on the first floor. Any building outside this overlay retains the new flexibility for first-floor residential or commercial use, aligning the zoning code with contemporary economic and community trends.

High Street’s legacy as a hub of **Victorian architecture** and **historic significance**—showcased by landmarks such as the Italianate residence of Governor Andrew Gregg Curtin—underscores the borough’s commitment to preserving its unique identity. Coupled with Bellefonte’s lively downtown, scenic creekside setting, and year-round community events, the VSO ensures that Bellefonte’s historic charm and commercial vitality remain front and center for residents and visitors alike.

Changes to Current Zoning

Current Regulations

The Central Business District (CBD) and Waterfront Commercial zones in Bellefonte currently allow for a variety of commercial uses, reflecting the borough's historical focus on retail, dining, and service-oriented businesses. While residential uses are permitted on upper floors, **first-floor residential units are not allowed** under existing rules. This requirement aims to maintain an active commercial presence at street level, preserving the traditional look and function of Bellefonte's core business areas. However, the result has been an overabundance of commercial space, leading to high vacancy rates and limited flexibility for property owners—especially in less frequented corridors.

Proposed Modifications

1. Allow First-Floor Residential Use Outside the Victorian Storefront Overlay

In areas not covered by the Victorian Storefront Overlay (VSO), property owners would be permitted to convert ground-floor spaces into residential units. This change aims to reduce vacancies and align zoning with modern needs, including the rise of remote work and shifting retail trends.

2. Maintaining Commercial Requirements for Key Corridors

In the VSO—covering the most historically and commercially significant blocks—**ground-floor commercial use** would remain mandatory. By doing so, the borough preserves the vital storefronts and the traditional look of primary downtown corridors, maintain business services in the VSO, supporting foot traffic and protecting Bellefonte's Victorian charm.

3. Encourage Adaptive Reuse of Historic Buildings

Both the modified zones and the overlay emphasize **adaptive reuse**, ensuring that owners of historic structures can repurpose their properties while retaining architectural integrity. This approach not only revitalizes underutilized buildings but also protects Bellefonte's reputation as a showcase of Victorian-era design.

Through these targeted zoning changes, Bellefonte seeks to strike a balance: **fostering economic development** by reducing the glut of commercial space, while **preserving the iconic storefront character** of the borough's most cherished Victorian blocks.

Benefits of the Victorian Storefront Overlay (VSO)

Implementing the Victorian Storefront Overlay (VSO) offers a range of advantages to Bellefonte Borough—especially for those who value the area’s historical character and want to encourage fiscally responsible, community-oriented growth.

1. Economic Benefits

1. Increased Property Use and Decreased Vacancies

- **Value:** Reducing government hurdles helps property owners make productive use of their spaces, increasing property values and tax revenues.
- **Outcome:** Filling empty storefronts—either through businesses or newly permitted residential units—creates a more vibrant and market-driven local economy.

2. Attraction of New Residents to Downtown

- **Value:** Enhances the community’s tax base and stimulates private-sector investment.
- **Outcome:** More residents in the CBD strengthens consumer demand for local businesses, making downtown Bellefonte a self-sustaining economic hub.

2. Maintenance of Bellefonte’s Victorian Character

- **Value:** Balances tradition with economic realities, ensuring Bellefonte remains attractive to both tourists and potential new businesses.
- **Outcome:** Protecting the architectural legacy of High Street and other key downtown blocks fosters civic pride and sustains the borough’s unique identity.

3. Greater Flexibility for Property Owners and Tenants

- **Value:** Upholds the principles of property rights by giving owners latitude to determine the most beneficial use of their buildings.
- **Outcome:** Streamlined conversions allow building owners to respond quickly to market changes, whether that means retail, office, or residential uses.

Conclusion

The proposed Victorian Storefront Overlay (VSO) is a targeted solution to Bellefonte’s excess of ground-floor commercial space and the pressing need to preserve its historic Victorian charm. By focusing first-floor commercial requirements on key blocks of High Street and allowing greater flexibility for residential use in other areas, the VSO responds to current economic realities—such as the rise of e-commerce and remote work—while maintaining the borough’s most iconic storefronts and architectural heritage.

In adopting this overlay, Bellefonte Borough positions itself to:

1. **Revitalize Underutilized Spaces:** Encouraging residential conversions in secondary corridors helps fill vacancies, generate foot traffic, and reduce blight.
2. **Preserve Historic Identity:** Ensuring commercial continuity in the borough’s most visible and historically significant blocks reinforces Bellefonte’s reputation as “Pennsylvania’s Victorian Jewel.”
3. **Support Economic Growth:** By attracting new residents, businesses, and investment, the VSO supports small enterprises and cultivates a stronger tax base, ultimately strengthening municipal finances.
4. **Foster Flexibility and Resilience:** Granting property owners the option to adapt buildings to emerging market needs can help Bellefonte remain competitive and welcoming to future generations.