6 ENCOURAGE APPROPRIATE DENSITIES ON THE PERIPHERY

INTRODUCTION

Rural communities generally want to remain rural or maintain their small-town character. Many of these communities encourage low-density development in the belief that it will maintain the rural character. However, low-density developments are usually more suburban than rural in nature and frequently use suburban standards for streets, landscaping, setbacks, and lot sizes. For communities trying to preserve rural character, development of 2- to 10-acre lots is particularly challenging. Lots of this size pose a host of problems that often undermine rural character and make it difficult to protect natural and fiscal resources. These include:

- Infrastructure and services are more costly and inefficient to provide.[25]
- Residents demand services, such as road maintenance and recreational facilities, but the supporting tax base is inadequate to provide these services.
- Productive agricultural lands and sensitive natural areas are fragmented, which makes farming or ranching more difficult and disrupts natural habitats.
- Domestic animals and trash are introduced into agricultural areas and wildlife habitat.
- Future town-level development is often difficult or impossible if the development does not include easements for central water or sewer lines or drainage or has limited and disconnected road rights-of-way.
- These lots often rely on septic systems, which can fail (see Chapter 4: Use Wastewater Infrastructure Practices That Meet Development Goals).

Photo courtesy of EPA

Development on the edge of town, as in Bel Air, Maryland, can include walking paths to transition between homes and open space.

- Directing growth to existing towns uses infrastructure in which public money has already been invested. Development that is outside of these areas does not take full advantage of these taxpayer investments.
- Large, spread-out lots make it difficult to walk or bike to destinations, forcing residents to drive everywhere, increasing air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions from driving and making it less convenient for people to work regular physical activity into their daily routines.

The density of development helps shape the character of a community. High rises evoke big cities; subdivisions of single-family homes are typical of many suburbs. Farms, villages, and towns with small, walkable downtowns are typical of rural settings. Densities vary by place and circumstance; one key to preserving a sense of place and improving the community is to use the appropriate density for the context.

Rural communities often allow land development patterns that are not dense enough to provide cost-effective services and infrastructure, but that are too dense to maintain a truly rural feel. Such development patterns typically fragment agricultural

25 For example, one study describes the potential infrastructure and development cost savings of traditional neighborhood development versus conventional development. See: Ford, J. "Comparative Infrastructure & Material Analysis of Smart Growth & Conventional Projects." Morris Beacon. January 13, 2010. pp. 3-6. http://www.morrisbeacon.com/media/portfolio-projects/research/MBD-EPA-infrastructure.pdf.

lands and natural resource areas, which can harm the area's economic and environmental health.

Typical housing densities of about two to four units per acre close to town, and one unit per 2 to 10 acres in more rural areas, can create problems for rural communities. These densities result in lots that are too big to mow easily and usually too small to farm. One narrow circumstance in which this pattern can work is in some areas near cities, where 5 to 10 acres can support a productive farm-to-market business.

The appropriate density depends on regional context; what makes sense in rural Virginia might not be the right density in Montana. In places close to major cities, five units per acre might make sense, while in ranch lands in the West, one unit per 160 acres might be appropriate.

Appropriate density also depends on the community's proximity to cities and to agricultural or natural resource areas. Rural communities on the periphery of cities usually need to accommodate growth, so they need to determine the right density to make sure that the inevitable development is done in a way that enhances the entire community. In communities that are surrounded by open space and that are not experiencing much growth, the edge can be a transition zone where clustered homes on small lots give way to agricultural uses.

A variety of factors fuel low-density development, including:

- People want to move to rural communities for the quality of life.
- Many people want affordable second and vacation homes in rural areas.
- Rural communities want to grow and to generate jobs.
- Greenfield land typically can be developed easily under current zoning with no special approvals.

Dispersed development typically features single-use pods of homes or commercial uses that are not connected to other places. These places lack a town center with a concentration of other uses. To convert these areas into a pattern that can thrive over time, rural communities could designate small town centers. Directing development to those centers could reduce travel between spread-out housing subdivisions or could at least shorten the driving time between locations. These clusters of more intense development with a mix of uses will become gateways to the homes and businesses located nearby.

RESPONSE TO THE PROBLEM

As discussed above, densities that are inconsistent with community character in rural areas create a development pattern that can be worrisome from fiscal, environmental, social, and health perspectives. Developments that provide transportation options, opportunities to access a range of businesses, and access to open space are more likely to sustain themselves over time by attracting and retaining businesses and residents and by using resources efficiently. A community should determine what type of place it is trying to be and then plan for development patterns and associated densities accordingly. There is no specific formula or metric to apply. Addressing this issue is a nuanced process that requires understanding that density ultimately characterizes an area, no matter what a future land use map might indicate. For example, if subdivisions with typical suburban densities are proposed and built, they will likely attract similar densities and commensurate uses, such as commercial shopping strips. Connecting development decisions to the plans that have been developed will help ensure that the community gets the type of development it envisions.

One way to deal with this density context challenge is for communities to make sure that their local comprehensive plans direct new development to areas that are within a natural edge to the community. For example, a major road or a river might provide a barrier to expansion and clearly define an edge to the community.

Another idea for addressing the density context is to expand the town's street pattern (often a terrain-modified grid) while using existing infrastructure capacity, with development ending at an agricultural zone on the community's edge. Some communities reinforce this approach by limiting utility extensions and prohibiting septic systems in the undeveloped land beyond the edge of town. This process will be most effective once the community has committed to this development pattern, as it can be continued outside of the core boundaries of the town and extended to create a consistent density.

These remedies address only the properties at or near a town's edge. Equally challenging are subdivisions and large, freestanding residential and commercial developments scattered in more remote rural areas. These developments are usually under county purview, so dealing effectively with them requires cooperation between municipalities and counties. In these cases, it is important to a town to have a strong relationship with the county government to ensure that there is consensus on how to plan for new development. For instance, questions that will need

to be addressed might include: Will the town's development densities be continued in targeted areas in the county to create consistency? What are appropriate densities for transition areas that are acceptable to both the town and county? Answers to these questions require discussion and information exchange.

To get public support to implement changes, communities might need to educate municipal staff and officials, the general public, and other stakeholders about the advantages of more compact development—for example, making stores, schools, parks, and other amenities more economically viable and easier for residents to get to by putting them closer to homes; economies of scale in providing services; and fiscal responsibility. Outreach is typically most effective when it is part of a broader community or regional planning process. Education and understanding can help develop the political will to adopt and enforce zoning codes, development policies, and incentives that will encourage the desired development patterns.

EXPECTED BENEFITS

- Having densities set in advance for designated growth areas gives landowners and developers more predictability.
- More compact development reduces taxpayer costs for local government-provided infrastructure and services.
- Compact development accommodates more growth in developed areas, helping to preserve large contiguous blocks of open space, agricultural lands, and natural resource areas such as wetlands and wildlife habitat.
- Compact development reduces interference with agricultural operations and helps keep farming and ranching viable in the community.
- Development that is compact and well-connected makes walking and biking more appealing, which can make it easier for people to work activity into their daily lives and improve their health.
- Shorter driving distances and more transportation options help reduce greenhouse gases and other pollution.

STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION

1. Modest Adjustments

- Develop design regulations that require street connectivity with adjacent neighborhoods, and create land use district transitions to adjacent agricultural or undeveloped areas.
- Allow cluster or conservation subdivisions at the edge of town to transition to true rural areas (see Chapter 7: Use Cluster Development to Transition From Town to Countryside).
- Designate locations for small hamlets in rural areas to serve as local service centers for residents. Focus public efforts and programs such as outreach from the chamber of commerce for small business development on these centers to help develop viable small businesses and services.
- Prioritize public works improvements and investment in existing town business districts. Create incentives to encourage well-designed development adjacent to town to make the best use of these investments.

2. Major Modifications

- Adopt town and county comprehensive plans that recommend appropriate densities in town influence areas.
- Establish community service areas in comprehensive plans that limit service provision to towns and town influence areas.
- Adopt true agricultural zone districts (one unit per 20 to 80 or more acres). The size of these districts can vary somewhat depending on geographic region, sites, soils, and the type of agricultural business. Encourage use of conservation easements in these districts.
- Require minimum densities in areas designated for growth.
- Require cluster or conservation subdivisions to be located at the town's edge to provide transition to rural areas. Do not allow them in active agricultural areas or in sensitive natural areas outside town influence areas.
- Revamp the annexation policy to support appropriate densities on the periphery of growth areas. Depending on local context, communities annex land to expand the tax base or to ensure that a particular area is developed in a specific manner once zoning is applied (see Chapter 8: Create Annexation Policies and Development Standards That Preserve Rural Character). Many peripheral areas that could later be annexed are developed with densities that are not appropriate to the character of the area.

3. Wholesale Changes

- Undertake joint town-county planning to develop consistent growth management policies that designate preferred growth areas and limit the use and location of large-scale PUDs and new rural towns in unincorporated areas outside town influence areas.
- Create a review process to ensure that new developments are balanced communities providing a full range of services, housing, and employment, rather than isolated subdivisions.
- Adopt an adequate public facilities ordinance (where permitted by state code) that sets criteria for utility expansion and service of outlying developments, and require areas that fail to meet public facility standards to be prioritized in local capital spending plans. Require that infrastructure, such as roads, water and sewer service, and schools, be in place when new development is constructed.

PRACTICE POINTERS

- Analyze whether existing zoning and subdivision provisions allow division of land for residential development without subdivision review. Piecemeal subdividing without review opens the door for development in rural areas that fragments agricultural or natural lands over time.
- The appropriate lot size in agricultural zone districts will vary depending on the region, state, land use patterns, and types of agriculture. Close to urban markets, smaller lots can be appropriate, generally if agricultural zoning and tax exemption requires proof of active agricultural use.
- Some local governments have provided support for land trusts to purchase or accept donation of conservation easements from farmers and ranchers, allowing landowners to realize some value while maintaining agricultural operations.
- Public outreach and education—using meetings, workshops, and development charrettes—are important to implementing these significant changes.

EXAMPLES AND REFERENCES

Bowers, D. "Achieving Sensible Agricultural Zoning to Protect PDR Investment." Presented at the Protecting Farmland at the Fringe conference, September 6, 2001. http://www.farmlandinfo.org/documents/29520/Achieving_Sensible_Agricultural_Zoning_full_presentation.pdf.

Burchell, R. et al. *Cost of Sprawl –2000*. TCRP Report 74. Transportation Research Board. 2002. pp. 56-80. http://onlinepubs.trb.org/Onlinepubs/tcrp/tcrp_rpt_74-a.pdf.

County of Marin, California. "Marin Countywide Agriculture Element – Executive Summary." http://www.co.marin.ca.us/depts/cd/main/comdev/advance/cwp/ag.cfm. Accessed January 8, 2010.

Daniels, T. "What to Do about Rural Sprawl?" Presented at the American Planning Association Conference, Seattle, WA. April 28, 1999. http://www.mrsc.org/subjects/planning/rural/daniels.aspx.

Duerksen, C. and Van Hemert, J. *True West: Authentic Development Patterns for Small Towns and Rural Areas*. American Planning Association. 2003.

Freedgood, J., Tanner, L., Mailler, C., et al. *Cost of Community Services Studies: Making the Case for Conservation*. American Farmland Trust. 2004. http://www.farmlandinfo.org/documents/27757/FS_COCS_8-04.pdf.

Freedgood, J. *Saving American Farmland: What Works*. American Farmland Trust. 1997. http://www.farmlandinfo.org/farmland_preservation_literature/index.cfm?function=article_view&articleID=29384.

Livingston, A., Ridlington, E., Baker, M. *The Costs of Sprawl: Fiscal, Environmental, and Quality of Life Impacts of Low-Density Development in the Denver Region*. Environment Colorado. 2003. http://www.policyarchive.org/handle/10207/5153.

Pruetz, R. *Beyond Takings and Givings*. Arje Press. 2003.

U.S. Department of Agriculture. Farmland Protection Policy Act. http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/alphabetical/fppa/?&cid=nrcs143_008275. Accessed December 11, 2009.

Washington Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development. *Keeping the Rural Vision: Protecting Rural Character & Planning for Rural Development*. 1999. http://www.cted.wa.gov/DesktopModules/CTEDPublications/CTEDPublicationsView.aspx?tabID=0&alias=CTED&lang=en&ItemID=974&MId=944&wversion=Staging.

Wells, B. *Smart Growth at the Frontier: Strategies and Resources for Rural Communities*. Northeast-Midwest Institute. 2002. http://www.activelivingbydesign.org/events-resources/resources/smart-growth-frontier-strategies-and-resources-rural-communities.

7 USE CLUSTER DEVELOPMENT TO TRANSITION FROM TOWN TO COUNTRYSIDE

INTRODUCTION

Cluster or conservation development[26]—homes clustered on a portion of a site and the rest of the land preserved as open space—is used to preserve large tracts of open space and agricultural land. Clustering allows landowners and developers to attain the overall allowable density on a site—getting the most development potential out of the site—while preserving a significant amount of it as open space. While clustering can be an effective tool, many rural jurisdictions do not get the results they expect.

If they are near agricultural lands, cluster developments can introduce residents into the area who might not be used to living near farming operations. Complaints about noise, dust, and odors; harassment of livestock by domestic pets; and other issues often follow. Nearby farms might be forced to take expensive mitigation measures or even shut down. Similarly, cluster developments in ecologically sensitive areas can fragment wildlife habitat, introduce invasive species to the detriment of others, and introduce humans and pets into the habitat. For these reasons, cluster developments should be carefully located.

Cluster developments work best where towns transition to true rural areas with active agricultural or livestock operations and large contiguous natural areas. In transition areas, the developed cluster can be adjacent to existing development on the edge of town, with the open space acting as a transition or buffer that separates the development from undeveloped areas. This approach can work as long as extensive additional growth is not expected; otherwise, that additional growth could leapfrog to the other side of the cluster buffer with limited connections to the town.

Photo courtesy of Victoria Ranney

Cluster development can help a rural community transition between town and countryside. Prairie Crossing in Grayslake, Illinois, clustered homes to protect a large swath of prairie. The community includes a station on a rail line that goes to Chicago, a working farm, historic community buildings, and energy-efficient new homes.

26 These terms are nearly interchangeable. For the purpose of this chapter, only *cluster developments* will be used.

Cluster developments are often stand-alone subdivisions in the countryside surrounded by open space, unconnected to towns and requiring residents to drive long distances to get to daily destinations. Learning from this experience, local governments are beginning to direct cluster development to the periphery of existing towns and villages or are limiting their size (e.g., no more than 10 residential lots) to control the impact they have on rural character, agricultural operations, and wildlife habitat. However, even with these strategies, cluster developments can create concentrations of homes in locations so spread out that residents still must drive everywhere.

RESPONSE TO THE PROBLEM

As a first step, small towns and rural counties can adopt zoning and subdivision provisions that allow cluster development only at the periphery of towns. Rural local governments often resist smaller lots (e.g., less than 2 acres) in rural areas, assuming that they will erode rural character. However, when cluster developments are used in appropriate locations—areas between towns and true rural areas—they can provide a smooth transition between town-scaled development and open lands. The homes can be adjacent to already-developed areas (to provide connectivity) or areas with an available mix of uses, infrastructure, and services, while the open space portion of the site provides a buffer between the built-up area and rural land.

To use cluster development effectively, communities need to decide which transition areas are most appropriate for this approach. Offering zoning and/or development incentives can encourage development in those locations. By mapping areas that should be preserved as working lands or natural resource areas and areas that could support future infrastructure expansion, the community can direct development to locations that make sense. Requiring open space preserved through cluster development to abut existing open spaces protects large blocks of land, which better supports agriculture, wildlife habitat, and rural landscapes over the long term.

Some communities mandate standards for cluster development in their ordinances. Others offer voluntary cluster development ordinances with incentives, such as density bonuses. Density bonuses can be flexible, with the number of additional units based on the quality of the design or other community benefits. Clustering offers the most benefits to the community when

Photo courtesy of UGArdener via Flickr.com

Serenbe, a development about 30 miles southwest of Atlanta, Georgia, preserves more than 70 percent of its land as farmland and natural green space. It clusters development into three hamlets that include various housing types, restaurants, live-work spaces, stores, and services.

cluster development locations are chosen based on local and regional priorities for preserving natural habitat and cultural treasures. Communities could measure how well a proposed cluster development meets specific, measurable factors such as:

- The per unit amount of impervious surfaces, road length, or loss of woodlands and other specific resources.
- Orientation of lots around a central green or square or an amenity such as a meadow, a stand of trees, a lake, or another natural feature.
- Preservation of visually prominent areas such as ridges or hilltops and areas along secondary public roads.
- Reducing peak discharges of stormwater runoff to levels that consistent with the discharges from that site before it was developed.
- Capture of 80 percent of the sediments and pollutants in runoff from a one-year storm event.

EXPECTED BENEFITS

- Well-designed and -located cluster development can provide an appropriate transition between town and countryside.
- Cluster development can permit ranchers, farmers, and other landowners to realize development value from their property while protecting large, contiguous blocks of open space for agriculture or to protect sensitive natural areas.
- Local governments can avoid fragmentation of agricultural lands and wildlife habitat when they approve cluster development in preferred locations inside town influence areas.
- Compact, well-designed cluster development requires less paved area for roads and less expansion of water and sewer infrastructure.
- Cluster development can provide environmental and fiscal advantages, such as reducing infrastructure costs and making it cheaper to provide community services (e.g., police and fire protection).

STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION

1. Modest Adjustments

- Require open space, agricultural, and/or ranchland preservation plans on the development site as part of a cluster development proposal.
- Create a comprehensive cluster development policy, summarizing the community's vision for land uses, connectivity to the existing town, and natural resource preservation for new development proposals.
- Provide modest density bonuses to encourage cluster development in town influence areas (e.g., one additional unit for every 10 units permitted under current zoning).
- Allow community septic systems for cluster developments in town influence areas where central sewer is not available.

2. Major Modifications

- In comprehensive plans, designate growth areas that are appropriate locations for cluster development.
- Adopt comprehensive cluster development regulations as an alternative to standard development in all zone districts on the town's edges.
- Adopt future development standards so that clusters in town influence areas can accommodate more development and get infrastructure in the future (e.g., provide easements for water and sewer lines and drainage or designate future connections for rights-of-way to create a connected street network).

3. Wholesale Changes

- Require open space, agricultural, and/or ranchland maintenance and management plans for all cluster development.
- Prohibit cluster development in viable agricultural and sensitive natural areas. Designate prohibited locations in the land use plan and on the zoning map.
- Mandate that permit approvers use specific performance criteria in reviewing and approving cluster subdivision proposals.

PRACTICE POINTERS

- In drafting cluster subdivision provisions, specify preferred locations for open space (e.g., environmentally sensitive areas). Encourage sites that are contiguous with existing development, but allow non-contiguous open space in specific, defined circumstances (e.g., where there are multiple natural features on a site such as streams and steep slopes).
- During the planning phases, ensure the development includes open space, preserves views, and limits impacts on natural areas as required by the local jurisdiction.
- Reach out to landowners and developers to educate them about the process and the benefits of cluster development, especially the potential tax advantages of putting easements in place.

EXAMPLES AND REFERENCES

Arendt, R. *Conservation Design for Subdivisions: A Practical Guide to Creating Open Space Networks.* Island Press: Washington, DC. 1996. pp. 33-38.

Church, J. "Local Community Resources: Cluster/Conservation Development." University of Illinois Extension. http://urbanext.illinois.edu/lcr/LGIEN2000-0010.html. Accessed January 8, 2010.

Duerksen, C. and Snyder, C. *Nature-Friendly Communities: Habitat Protection and Land Use Planning.* Island Press: Washington, DC. 2005. "Chapter 4: Baltimore County, MD: Using the Whole Toolkit for Habitat Preservation."

Haines, A. "Regulatory Approaches to Conservation Subdivisions in Wisconsin." *The Land Use Tracker*, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, Center for Land Use Education, vol.2, no.1. 2002. http://www.uwsp.edu/cnr/landcenter/tracker/Summer2002/Tracker.html.

Ipswich River Watershed Association (Massachusetts). *Water Wise Communities: A Handbook for Municipal Managers in the Ipswich River Watershed*. 2006. http://ipswich-river.org/resources/water-wise-communities-handbook.

Ohm, B. *An Ordinance for a Conservation Subdivision*. University of Wisconsin Extension. 2000. http://urpl.wisc.edu/people/ohm/consub.pdf.

10 PLAN AND ENCOURAGE RURAL COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT

INTRODUCTION

Like all economically sustainable places, rural communities need a strong commercial base. A commercial zoning designation typically allows offices, stores, services, restaurants, medical facilities, and similar activities, but not residences. Newer zoning codes—based on patterns long established in nearly every town in America—incorporate a variety of commercial and residential types and uses into mixed-use zoning. A mix of uses reduces driving distances and makes it easier for people to walk or bike to their daily destinations because homes, workplaces, stores, schools, and services are closer together. Directing commercial development to existing towns and villages helps encourage residential growth in town and reduces the likelihood of scattered businesses in rural areas that encourage more spread-out development and fragmented land. Encouraging commercial development in towns helps to strengthen downtowns and solidify tax bases so the towns have adequate revenues to support community services such as schools, roads, and emergency services.

While a guiding principle for towns and counties should be to focus commercial development in existing centers, there are legitimate reasons to allow commercial development in undeveloped areas outside municipalities. Common-sense approaches should apply, and towns need to make sure that existing zoning does not impede compatible new operations and activities.

Emerging strategies that could help the traditional resource economy adapt to the changing global market and sustain itself over the long term include more sustainable agriculture practices; production and distribution of renewable energy, such as wind, solar, biomass, methane from livestock, and geothermal; and green jobs in former rural manufacturing plants converted to produce, distribute, install, and maintain green energy facilities and distribution networks. Most of these strategies will probably require changes to existing zoning and development codes.

Photo courtesy of EPA

Reuse of former industrial and commercial sites lets rural communities use their existing resources, preserve their heritage, and promote new economic activity. For example, this former mill in Front Royal, Virginia, is now a restaurant.

RESPONSE TO THE PROBLEM

Rural local governments are managing and encouraging commercial development in a variety of ways:

- Some local plans call for most commercial development to be located in incorporated municipalities, with a few exceptions.
- Some local governments sign formal intergovernmental agreements that implement these policies through zoning district regulations that do not allow commercial growth in outlying areas.
- Other jurisdictions that allow some commercial development outside towns have adopted design standards to help ensure that the new development respects rural character.
- Rural localities that have experienced commercial strip

development along entry corridors that lead into town centers from the surrounding areas are using corridor redevelopment strategies to convert aging shopping strips and underused parking lots into walkable, mixed-use destinations.[34]

Careful planning and close cooperation between towns and counties can help ensure that commercial development in rural areas strengthens the local economy while protecting the environment and the rural quality of life. This cooperation could include interjurisdictional agreements that articulate the value of emerging green industries. For example, entrepreneurs seeking to site wind farms and solar installations in rural areas are also considering rural locations for the related manufacturing and maintenance facilities, potentially providing new high-paying jobs.

Incentives can help direct commercial and industrial development to appropriate locations, like existing Main Streets or unused industrial, warehouse, or brownfield properties. Businesses might be more interested in reusing vacant properties when at least one property owner in the area has successfully converted a building back to productive use. Localities should make sure that in-town zoning allows, where feasible, the uses and services typically found in strip centers.

Many rural communities identify appropriate locations for expanded commercial or mixed-use development, including:

- Downtowns and adjacent commercial areas.
- Small commercial or mixed-use districts in residential neighborhoods near downtown.
- Commercial corridors, which have many buildings and aging sites that are underused or underperforming as retail or commercial businesses.
- Traditional industrial areas, agricultural service areas (often near railroads), and warehouse districts.

Downtowns and surrounding commercial districts usually have a variety of sites that can provide development opportunities. Commercial properties, including light-industrial or warehouse buildings, can be converted to mixed-use development with ground-floor retail or offices. Even small towns can have large industrial parcels ideal for transformation into commercial, retail, or mixed-use districts. A financial feasibility analysis identifying appropriate potential uses can help the development community to understand the opportunities.

Small-town commercial corridors can suffer from aging, underused properties as well as competition from newer, outlying retail centers. They typically have greyfield (e.g., underused parking lots or shopping centers) and brownfield properties (e.g., former gas stations, dry cleaners, or industrial sites that might be contaminated), often at key intersections and within walking distance of residential neighborhoods.

Localities and business groups can map underused sites along major commercial corridors and evaluate their potential. Reusing these retail and service sites has several benefits:

- They are often large enough to be viable, mixed-use developments.
- Existing retail zoning might already allow commercial, residential, and mixed-use development.
- The connection to adjacent residential neighborhoods is often minimal, and new mixed-use development will be more compatible than existing commercial uses, helping to build neighborhood support for more compact development.
- Many older shopping centers were built at intersections, which can make redevelopment projects targets for enhanced or extended transit service or promising locations for future transit service, if none is currently in place.

Corridor redevelopment plans can be developed through a charrette, with government staff, residents, business owners, and elected officials creating a vision for the corridor and design concepts for specific sites. This approach can expedite redevelopment by providing general direction to potential developers, even before any longer-term transportation improvements are completed. These redevelopment plans could be used as guidance in a PUD process (see Chapter 3: Reform Rural Planned Unit Developments) or as design guidelines for a mixed-use project under retail zoning that allows residential uses. These corridors could also be receiving areas for TDR lands (see Chapter 9: Protect Agricultural and Sensitive Natural Areas). Local governments can assist in these types of projects by expediting design and review processes and by providing infrastructure financing for streetscape and utility upgrades.

34 ICF International and Freedman Tung Sasaki. *Restructuring the Commercial Strip: A Practical Guide for Planning the Revitalization of Deteriorating Strip Corridors.* EPA. 2010. http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/corridor_guide.htm.

Since residents of nearby neighborhoods sometimes object to redevelopment of corridors and downtown commercial districts, the town could adopt performance standards to measure and control noise, parking, lighting, and other neighborhood concerns. Similarly, the town could develop performance standards to encourage home businesses while minimizing any impacts. These standards should focus on the perceived impacts or concerns, like traffic or parking, rather than specific occupations or uses, to avoid the subtle bias that can sometimes arise. The community also needs a mechanism to determine when a home occupation or craft, such as tailor or woodworker, becomes a cottage industry. The same is true for farm-based businesses; a new "agricultural workplace" zone could allow commercial, light manufacturing, retail, or related uses on an owner-occupied farm, allowing home offices, on-farm sales, and agriculture-related industry (see Chapter 9: Protect Agricultural and Sensitive Natural Areas).

EXPECTED BENEFITS

- Directing commercial growth to towns and along corridors helps reduce scattered development in unincorporated rural areas.
- Active commercial centers and downtowns create a strong sense of community and bring shops, services, and employment.
- Development increases the tax base to support municipal services.
- Residents can walk or bike to stores and services, which could improve their health, save them money, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions and other air pollution.
- Redevelopment of aging corridors that do not fit with the town's desired character also helps avoid commercial development outside towns that detracts from rural character and scenic views.
- Capitalizing on public and private investment in renewable energy facilities in rural areas can generate jobs and tax revenues.

Photo courtesy of Jim Charlier

Encouraging commercial development, including small businesses, in the downtown strengthens the community and brings new activity to Main Street, as seen in Wells, Maine.

STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION

1. Modest Adjustments

- Adopt a policy in county comprehensive plans to locate most commercial development in incorporated towns unless that development must be in an outlying location due to its use (e.g., processing agricultural products).
- Allow commercial development only in town influence areas or established unincorporated hamlets and crossroads villages with good connections to existing development, not in more remote locations.
- Direct state and local public works spending in ways that support and encourage activity in existing commercial areas in incorporated towns and discourage it elsewhere.
- If there must be commercial development in outlying areas, cluster it to create nodes instead of stringing it along the highway.
- Assess the support and customer base for additional retail development and match the zoning to the likely size of eventual build-out to help direct development toward preferred areas.

- Encourage new industrial activity in town influence areas by marketing sites adjoining rail stations and other locations where the community wants development. If the community is offering development incentives, it could give priority to projects that locate on these sites.

2. Major Modifications

- Prohibit rural commercial development in many county zone districts. Allow it only in service areas and locations designated in the comprehensive plan.
- Conduct a study of all available parking in downtown and commercial districts, and implement a parking management plan or "park once" district to encourage shared parking and to use parking more efficiently. When parking is developed at appropriate levels, uses can be more compact, and the community can add design amenities like streetscaping, which makes business locations more attractive.
- Conduct a planning study along an aging commercial corridor to identify key redevelopment sites and priority transportation improvements. Adopt any required zoning amendments or an overlay zoning code to allow and encourage redevelopment.
- Conduct a commercial market analysis for the downtown to identify commercial opportunities and needs.

3. Wholesale Changes

- Sign an intergovernmental agreement with towns in the region to share tax revenues from unincorporated commercial development.
- Assess road, safety, infrastructure, and other impact fees on rural commercial development to reflect the full cost of services and facilities needed for development.
- Assess the potential for renewable and alternative energy production and associated manufacturing and services. Determine appropriate locations, siting requirements, and regulations to encourage green industry and jobs.
- Identify any publicly owned land or buildings that are appropriate for commercial, industrial, or mixed-use development. Conduct a planning workshop to identify preferred uses and to spur redevelopment. Coordinate with local and regional business and industry organizations to develop a marketing strategy to recruit businesses.
- Consider creating a TIF district to encourage and fund downtown commercial development.
- Allow commercial development in outlying areas by special use permit only after requiring the developer to demonstrate the need for that service in that area. Adopt site and building design standards to ensure that any commercial development is in keeping with rural character.

PRACTICE POINTERS

- Joint town-county planning for commercial development in rural areas is usually essential to a successful implementation program.
- Encourage staff to investigate potential technical assistance and funding opportunities to reuse vacant properties and formerly contaminated sites.
- Many state departments of transportation and regional planning agencies have programs and grants to support revitalization of Main Streets and redevelopment of commercial corridors as long as vehicle movement and safety are also addressed.

EXAMPLES AND REFERENCES

Ballash, H. *Keeping the Rural Vision: Protecting Rural Character and Planning for Rural Development*. Washington State Community, Trade and Economic Development (Washington State Department of Commerce). June 1999. http://www.commerce.wa.gov/DesktopModules/CTEDPublications/CTEDPublicationsView.aspx?tabID=0&alias=CTED&lang=en&ItemID=974&MId=944&wversion=Staging

Challam County, Washington. "Lamird Report: Granny's Café." September 2006. http://www.clallam.net/RealEstate/assets/applets/PAPRlamird2-GrannysCafe.pdf.

St. Lucie County, Florida. "Towns, Villages, and Countryside" (Master Plan). 2008. http://www.spikowski.com/StLucieLDRrevisions-Ordinance06-017-AsAdopted.pdf.