Reclaiming Commercial Strips and Strengthening Town Centers

This program describes and illustrates various re-development design strategies to create mixed-use centers from existing highway strips, to help communities implement smarter, more sustainable development patterns, and includes ideas for improving downtown economic viability and attractiveness.

The material presented is largely drawn from my newest book, *Envisioning Better Communities: Seeing More Options, Making Wiser Choices,* published by APA Planners' Press.

The 120-minute presentation (which can be adapted to fit time constraints) is generously illustrated with numerous successful examples and addresses the visual blight and land-use dysfunctionality of most highway commercial corridors and many downtowns. By adopting progressive site planning and design standards, cities and counties can prevent this kind of destructive development, which often spreads like a disfiguring disease along the regional road network.

Clients determine the degree of emphasis placed on reclaiming highway strips versus strengthening downtown centers, according to the needs of their audience.

This topic is of interest to professional planners, civic leaders, Planning Board/Commission members, landscape architects, engineers, commercial property owners and investors, and developers, who stand to benefit from the redevelopment and adaptive reuse of aging highway commercial corridors and downtowns into multi-use centers for the 21st century, as well as residents who care about the future economic vitality and livability of their community.

Birkdale Village, Huntersville, NC

Pewaukee Town Center, Pewaukee, WI

The presentation includes:

Multiple strategies blending the twin disciplines of Conservation Design and New Urbanism for rebuilding highway corridors, gradually increasing functionality and attractiveness.

Fundamentals of Form-Based Zoning (to locate different building types appropriately, according to scale and massing), and Low Impact Development strategies (to reduce the negative effects of new construction, particularly involving stormwater infiltration).

These concepts offer significant opportunities for commercial and mixed-use redevelopment, particularly in areas with existing infrastructure, increasing the viability of businesses, service providers, and current /future public transit operators.

Insights into how downtowns can be made more economically viable and visually attractive, including examples of national chains and franchises that have adapted their designs to harmonize with community character and local building traditions rather than imposing standard corporate building models that homogenize community appearance produce results describable as "Anywhere, USA".

The workshop addresses the following specific topic areas, among others:

- Replacing single-story, single-use, commercial buildings with multi-story mixed-use development, including residences,
- Integrating with existing or future public transit, such as bus routes and light rail lines running along these corridors ,whose length and linearity are a perfect match for these services,
- Creating internal streets, using "Official Maps" to create networks of streets linking properties not only up and down the highway corridor, but also linking properties two or three tiers of ownership behind the frontage parcels, facilitating inter-parcel vehicular circulation
- Establishing *minimum* height standards, (such as two stories in functional height) to encourage vertical integration of compatible mixed uses, such as retail and office, or rental residential.
- Setting *maximum* building setbacks from the highway, and requiring internal parking behind the buildings and/or within the development area
- Ensuring the provision of safe pedestrian walkways through parking lots and along internal streets
- Providing opportunities for affordable housing, above shops and offices, as was commonly done in downtowns before WWII, taking advantage of the same foundation and roof systems as provided for single-story construction
- Designing around natural features (streams, trees, knolls, rock outcrops, etc) and around historic/cultural features (farmhouses, barns, hedgerows, stone walls, etc.)
- Planting shade trees extensively along the highway, internal streets and pedestrian ways, and within internal parking areas, to increase attractiveness, user-friendliness, visitation frequency, and economic viability, in addition to cooling the temperature, cleansing the air, and soothing nerves
- Calming traffic through landscaped medians and roundabouts
- Managing stormwater to emphasize groundwater infiltration and recharge, through *rain gardens* and planting areas situated several inches below grade,

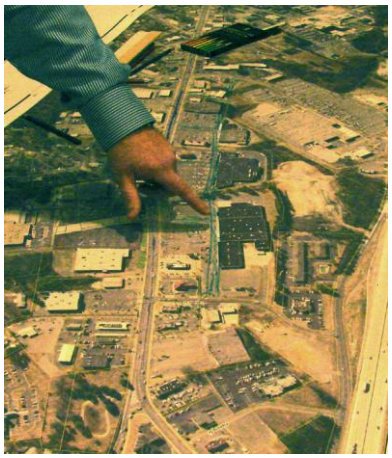
- Using native species in landscaping, e.g., for shrubs and wildflowers, minimizing water requirements, and capturing the distinctive “spirit of the place”

- Setting standards for signage, emphasizing the smaller-scale "monument style” signs (rather than tall pole-mounted designs),

- Requiring outdoor lighting to have vertical "cut-offs'" to keep light rays directed downward, not outward or upward (preventing roadside glare, light trespass onto adjoining properties, or violation of dark-sky principles).

Because the typical design life of most buildings is 25 to 30 years, communities can position themselves now to guide the future replacement of existing structures, by *working to articulate a vision, adopt plans, enact appropriate codes, and provide other incentives* to help ensure the future creation of economically viable and aesthetically attractive corridors and downtowns to meet the multiple needs and challenges of local residents and business owners.

Hands-On Design Exercise: As a follow-up to the powerpoint presentation, a participatory workshop (about 75 minutes long) is offered to provide attendees with an opportunity to learn first-hand how to retrofit an existing section of degraded commercial highway strip. Using an aerial photographic enlargement of a typical strip, participants mark up the base map with colored pencils to show how the kinds of improvements described and illustrated in the preceding presentation could be implemented in the typical example provided. When workshop participants have a chance to internalize what they have seen and heard during the powerpoint, they gain a deeper understanding of the concepts involved, and always learn more.



Workshop Length: This workshop usually runs two hours for the illustrated program, 60-75 minutes for the design exercise, plus 30 minutes for discussion.

***Bonus*: Model ordinance language, in electronic form, will be provided free to participants, on request.**

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