

Creating Vital Town Centers

Lessons from the Past, Strategies for the Future



Town or village centers are deeply ingrained in our region's history. New England's town centers have long served as commercial and residential hubs, for people of all socio-economic levels. By concentrating a mix of uses within compact land areas, the region's town centers provided residents with jobs, shops, and services within walking distance of their homes or reachable by public transportation. They also provided important amenities, such as public greens, libraries, schools and, in the case of larger centers, museums, theatres, and colleges. As a result of their compact nature and mix of uses, the centers maintained a physical cohesion, which delineated their boundaries from both outlying rural lands and neighboring towns, creating a sense of identity and place.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the single-use, automobile-dependent development trends that took root during the decades following World War II have had significantly adverse consequences for our cities and town centers. Despite a growing awareness of the economic, environmental, and social costs of low-density sprawl development, the trend toward this pattern of land use

has, over the decades, continued largely unabated. Today, despite many conspicuous efforts to encourage the economic and cultural revitalization of our town centers, most contemporary land use regulations continue to enable disorganized sprawl development, which perpetuates our reliance on cars and further threatens the vitality of the centers. Witness the trend towards big box retailing, typified by Wal-Mart and

Home Depot, in locations that are accessible only by automobile. These stores compete with, and further erode, the commercial core of our town centers, in turn making them less convenient, less desirable places to live.

The town center, or downtown, has different meaning to different communities. An urbanized city's center will vary greatly from that of a smaller, more rural community. However, there are a



Newburyport, Massachusetts, circa 1905.
 Courtesy of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities.

number of characteristics that most centers have in common. For purposes of this guidebook, the terms town center and downtown refer to places that have, or could have, the following characteristics:

- A mix of uses that brings people together for a variety of activities, including business, town affairs, living, recreation, shopping, work, and cultural pursuits
- A physically compact layout with higher densities in comparison to outlying areas
- A pedestrian-friendly environment in which most uses are within a five- or ten-minute walk (approximately 1,500 to 3,000 feet) of each other
- A strong public presence, such as greens or commons, city hall, a post office, or other public spaces and buildings
- A diversity of uses, to attract and benefit people of all ages and income levels

- An atmosphere that is friendly and inviting
- A presence of special features, such as historic buildings, landmarks, and views

The benefits of town centers with these characteristics are many. Concentrating future development in a compact fashion avoids the unnecessary development of agricultural and forestry lands and other open spaces. By providing a mix of uses within walkable distances of each other, compact development increases convenience and reduces our dependence on the car, thereby reducing air pollution, fuel consumption, and the environmental and economic costs associated with building and maintaining roads. The compact, mixed-use development associated with town centers also makes good economic sense, as it prevents unnecessary investment in sprawl-related infrastructure such as water and sewer lines;

avoids waste by making use of unused or underutilized land and buildings located in town centers; and concentrates densities in a manner that supports investment in public transit infrastructure and service.

Vital town centers also foster a sense of community, by bringing together people of varying ages, income levels, and ethnic backgrounds, both in the development of residential, mixed-use neighborhoods and in the use and enjoyment of public spaces and cultural resources. This allows for increased social interaction. Within these centers, the elderly and disabled have greater freedom, as they can access destinations such as retail stores and services, on foot or by transit. The benefits for this segment of the population are particularly important, considering that

Beacon Hill, Boston, Massachusetts



our nation's fastest growing age group is 85 and older, and that by 2020 nearly one in five Americans will be over 65. Town centers also provide for a strong sense of community, by retaining their historic character.

Towns seeking to promote development within their centers should make clear that the vitality and livability of the centers is of paramount importance, and that proposed land uses that undermine or conflict with that goal will not be permitted. Towns should convey this message in their master plans (see Chapter 2), and in the purpose statement of zoning bylaws. **(See Lawrence, Kansas)**

Planning Principles for Vital Town Centers

Several planning principles are crucial to ensuring livable, sustainable town centers. They should be included in town plans and should inform the more specific standards adopted in land use regulations. They include:

Town centers should be defined as the distinct geographical areas.

Centers are distinctive, in large part, because they are defined areas with a sense of place. Defining their boundaries in a manner that sets them apart from outlying areas, and within which appropriate development is to be encouraged, creates a sense of cohesion and identity. This, in turn, enhances the convenience and livability of downtowns, and avoids the unnecessary suburbanization of rural lands.

A vibrant mix of land uses should be allowed and encouraged.

Modern zoning regulations typically impose rigid separations of land uses, geographically isolating our homes from our places of work, entertainment, and shopping, and perpetuating our



Amherst, Massachusetts

Dana Weisbord

ever-growing reliance on automobiles. By their very nature, however, town centers are compact areas of development, containing a mix of uses (i.e., residential, retail, services) within walkable distances of one another. To create, revitalize, or maintain sustainable town centers, it is imperative that land use regulations call for a mix of uses within close proximity to one another.

An appropriate density of land uses is critical.

To achieve the critical mass of people and activities that is needed to support a vibrant downtown, it is important to work towards an appropriately high density of land uses. What constitutes an appropriate density varies from town to town. Increasing the density of town centers can be accomplished by encouraging so-called “infill” development, which involves the adaptive use of underutilized land and/or buildings within the town center, and by increasing the allowable density of buildings (such as by allowing, encouraging, or requiring buildings of a certain scale), in a manner consistent with the town's character.

Town centers should provide pedestrian-friendly environments.

One good measure of a town center's vitality is the number of pedestrians afoot. To enhance the character and sustainability of downtowns, it is critical to create environments that encourage pedestrian activity. Land use regulations should strive to accomplish this important goal, not only by fostering mixed-use development with appropriately high densities, as described above, but also by incorporating design standards that improve pedestrian access within town centers.

FOR EXAMPLE

In Lawrence, Kansas, the city's comprehensive development plan includes a policy to support the central business district as the region's only retail center. When a developer challenged the city's refusal to rezone land to permit a suburban shopping mall, the courts upheld the city's decision, stating that the city had a legitimate interest in supporting existing businesses and preserving the vitality of its downtown.

FOR EXAMPLE

Brunswick, Maine has a town center comprised of three “town center districts” and six “in-town residential neighborhoods.” Each district has subtle variations in permitted land uses, densities, and dimensional standards, as does each of the residential neighborhoods. The permitted uses, densities, and dimensional standards of these nine areas reflect, and perpetuate, the traditional development patterns that define Brunswick’s town center.

Hollis, New Hampshire has a historic district bylaw covering the town’s “agricultural and business zone,” its “town center zone,” and a portion of its residential and agricultural district. It also establishes a Historic District Commission, which must approve any plans to construct, alter, or demolish structures in the district. The bylaw, which covers residential and commercial structures, addresses architectural style, scale, and materials. It also recognizes the importance of the district’s setting, by acknowledging the importance of roadside trees, stone walls, open space, vistas, road widths, signs, and lighting. The bylaw requires that any demolition activity within the district occur only with the Historic District Commission’s approval, and “only when new construction would relate better to the historic district.” The bylaw makes clear that its purpose is “not to freeze the district in any period or to prevent future change.”

Amherst, Massachusetts’ zoning bylaw has a design review requirement for all development located within the town’s general business district, and abutting “limited business districts,” as well as for any exterior development projects located within 150 feet of the town common. According to the ordinance, a Design Review Board must determine whether to approve any such development, in light of prescribed general principles and standards intended to protect and enhance historic and aesthetic qualities, but without “mandating any official aesthetic style . . . or imposing the style of any particular historical period.”

Stowe, Vermont requires the Board of Adjustment to determine whether proposed developments in the town’s “village commercial districts” are “compatible with the historic character of Stowe Village,” and provides that such developments should generally be multi-story, with roof pitches, forms, and materials similar to those found in the Districts.

Regulatory Standards and Tools for Vital Town Centers

The following regulatory standards and tools can be implemented to encourage development in town centers, rather than in outlying suburbs and rural lands, and to create economically and socially vibrant downtowns.

Define Your Town Center

It is important to establish what land constitutes a town center, both for establishing a sense of place and for determining where to direct appropriate development. The town center’s geographic boundaries should be mapped, in both the town plan and zoning regulations. In towns with existing centers, historic buildings and development patterns can be used as starting points—

to determine the appropriate location and boundaries. In those cases in which a town center is to be created anew, existing buildings, roads, and infrastructure, as well as geological features, can be used to establish the center’s location and boundaries. Regardless of the circumstances, however, a town center with a distinct geographic identity can be established in the following ways.

ESTABLISH A TOWN CENTER DISTRICT. A regulation can be adopted which identifies and establishes a district in which appropriate mixes and densities of land uses are permitted. The most straightforward approach is a single district, in which a mix of residential, commercial, civic, and compatible light-industrial uses are permitted, and in which allowable densities create a compact pattern of development that is easily distinguishable from development patterns on surrounding lands. An alternative approach is to create a series of contiguous districts with subtle variations in permitted uses and densities that, in combination, take on the attributes of a town center. This approach is common in “master planned” traditional neighborhood developments, but it also can be implemented in existing towns. A town center also can be defined through zoning bylaws, by establishing an overlay district permitting certain uses with certain dimensional requirements within portions of adjacent districts. (See Appendix A for discussion of overlay districts.) **(See Brunswick, Me.)**

ESTABLISH A HISTORIC DISTRICT. To maintain historic character, towns can adopt regulations that designate all or a portion of a town center as a historic district. Such regulations typically create a local regulatory body—often called a “historic district commission”—to review development proposals that involve the construction of new buildings within the historic district, or

the demolition, alteration, or expansion of historic structures. It is important, however, that historic preservation ordinances not be used to convert buildings into artifacts, by preventing or discouraging the reasonable adaptation and use of historic structures for appropriate downtown activities. Those interested in establishing a historic district or an historic district commission should consult their state historic office about how to get started, and about what powers a commission can exercise under their state's law. (See Hollis, N.H.)

ADOPT DESIGN STANDARDS FOR NEW DEVELOPMENTS. Another device for enhancing the visual cohesion and identity of a town center is the adoption of design standards for new buildings. These can be incorporated into a town's bylaws and applied to new development projects in one or more districts. They also can be applied in the context of site plan review for certain types of development projects, or as part of a town's subdivision regulation. (See Amherst, Mass. & Stowe, Vt.)

COMPLEMENT WITH NON-REGULATORY STRATEGIES. Defining a town center also can be accomplished through *non*-regulatory means, such as the use of common streetscape furniture and signage, and/or the creation or preservation of landmark "gateways" to the downtown. Defining a town center in these ways can create a sense of identity and cohesion and, in turn, a greater sense of community.

Allow And Encourage A Mix of Uses in Your Town Center

A vibrant mix of land uses within a compact, walkable area is imperative to the livability and sustainability of a town center. A town that restricts residences in its center, for example, deprives stores of customers, and perpetuates automobile-dependent development outside the downtown. To ensure

a mix of uses, a town's land use bylaws should, at the very least, *allow* a mix of uses within the districts or overlay zones that comprise the town center. Better than simply *allowing* a mix of uses downtown, bylaws should *encourage*, and at times *require*, mixed uses as a means to enhance the vitality of downtown. Specifically, a town's bylaws can include the following approaches.

ALLOW A MIX OF USES IN THE TOWN CENTER. A town's bylaws should allow a mix of land uses to co-exist within the town center, or at least within portions of the geographic area that comprises it. Wherever a mix of uses is allowed—particularly in the highest density areas—such uses should, where appropriate, be permitted to co-exist within the same building (i.e., dwelling units located above retail establishments). To accomplish an effective mix

of compatible uses, towns can implement performance zoning (also known as flexible zoning). This approach, which is discussed in Appendix A, does not classify permitted and prohibited land uses, but instead focuses on the potential impacts that will result from a proposed development, and the compatibility of such impacts with surrounding land uses. Alternatively, towns can allow for a mix of uses through more conventional means, by listing one that is permitted by right in the town center, and/or those uses that may be allowed by a special (or conditional use) permit. (See Appendix A for a discussion of special permits.) (See Amherst, Mass. & Barrington, R.I., p.29)

ENCOURAGE A MIX OF USES IN DOWNTOWN BUILDINGS. Because a vibrant mix of uses is so important to a town center's vitality, the bylaws should not



Cambridge, Massachusetts. A mixed use block.

Dano Weisbord

only allow, but should encourage a mix of uses where appropriate. This can be accomplished through *incentive zoning*, provisions that encourage, but do not require, developers to include certain social or environmental amenities or qualities in their projects, in return for certain benefits. Incentives commonly used to encourage mixed-use projects include density bonuses, which allow developers to construct larger projects than would otherwise be permitted, or a streamlined permit process, that shortens permit review times.

REQUIRE CERTAIN PROJECTS TO INCORPORATE A MIX OF USES. In addition to allowing and encouraging a vibrant mix of uses in a town center, towns may also require that certain projects contain a mix of uses. For example, bylaws can require that downtown projects exceeding a certain size include, as a condition of receiving a building permit (or a special permit), a mix of uses. Such a requirement may make sense in specific areas of the town center, such as near a transit station. For example, a town can create a transit overlay zone in which all new development projects of a certain size, and within certain proximity of a transit station, must include a mix of commercial and residential uses.

Encourage “Infill” Development in Your Town Center

Modern land use trends have left many downtowns with vacant and underutilized buildings and land. It is not an unusual sight to see empty, unused space located above retail establishments. Making efficient use of these underutilized resources is essential to achieving “critical mass” densities to create a lively, multi-use town center, and to eliminating the sense of “dead space” and visual blight often associated with vacant or underused lots and structures. Encouraging the development, renovation, and productive use of these resources through infill development is

a critical strategy for revitalizing town centers and avoiding the environmental and economic costs associated with the development of new buildings and infrastructure in outlying lands. (See Chapter 5 for a discussion of siting large retailers in town centers or new, mixed use growth centers.)

Regrettably, there are a number of barriers that can make the cost of infill development higher than the cost of developing rural or suburban “greenfields,” thereby discouraging developers from pursuing projects in town centers. These barriers are discussed in Chapter 2, as are some of the non-regulatory approaches towns can take to foster infill development. There are a number of regulatory measures towns can implement to encourage infill development in town centers. Such regulatory measures include the following:

ALLOW, ENCOURAGE AND/OR REQUIRE COMPACT DEVELOPMENT. Because developable land in town centers is a finite resource, and because appropriately high densities are critical to ensuring the vitality of a downtown, infill development should be of a compact nature. Regrettably, many towns’ bylaws often impose land-consumptive requirements

such as minimum lot sizes, large setbacks, low coverages (often expressed in terms of floor-to-area ratio), and needlessly high minimum parking requirements. These requirements can result in densities that are insufficient to support a vital town center. They also can impede the development of a pedestrian-friendly environment by increasing the distance of buildings from sidewalks, and from one another. For downtown areas where higher densities are desired, bylaws can correct these common deficiencies by:

- *Eliminating minimum lot size requirements.* Eliminating such requirements allows new structures to be permitted on smaller parcels of land that otherwise might not be put to productive use. It also promotes a pedestrian-friendly environment by bringing buildings closer together.

- *Allowing, encouraging or requiring multiple-story buildings.* Buildings in town centers should have heights that are sufficient to maximize the use of vertical space, but which are sensitive to the desired “scale” and aesthetics of the town center. In addition to simply allowing buildings of greater height and/or density, zoning regulations can encourage taller buildings in town cen-



Randolph, Vermont. The building in the center of the photo, which has retail below and housing above, was recently built on a lot made vacant by a fire.

Julie Campoli

ters through incentive zoning and/or a transferable development rights program. (See Appendix A for a discussion of transferable development rights.) Furthermore, towns can *require* that buildings in the town center be at least of a minimum height and/or have a minimum floor-to-area ratio. According to land use planning expert Randall Arendt, “Village center buildings should definitively be required to meet minimum height standards (or ‘build-up’ lines) translating into at least one and one-half stories, with two-story construction preferred in at least one-third of new buildings.” Minimum height standards requiring even higher buildings may be appropriate for many towns, depending upon existing structures and aesthetics. (See **Newmarket, N.H.**)

- *Eliminating or reducing setback requirements.* Towns can encourage compact development in their centers by reducing or eliminating minimum setbacks for the fronts and sides of buildings (or at least imposing minimal setback requirements), and by establishing *maximum* front and side setbacks. Regulating setback distances in this manner is important to ensuring that land is used efficiently, maintaining a cohesive town center layout, and minimizing walking distances. Traditional development that allows buildings to be located directly on a public way (zero-lot-line development), and/or that allows buildings to be located directly side-to-side (common wall construction) enables an efficient use of limited land resources in a town center, and provides high densities to support a vibrant, pedestrian-friendly downtown. (See **Newmarket, N.H. & Barrington, R.I., p.31**)

- *Ensuring appropriate “bulk” of new buildings.* Zoning bylaws can ensure that requirements regarding the so-called “bulk” or “mass” of new buildings—typically measured in terms of floor-to-area ratio or square footage—direct high densities where they are most desired,



Julie Campoli

Stowe, Vermont. This residential development was added onto the existing village street grid. Small lot sizes and setbacks are similar to the traditional village pattern.

FOR EXAMPLE

Amherst, Massachusetts allows for a mix of residential and commercial uses in its “village center residence,” “village center business,” “limited business,” and “general business” districts. Buildings located within these districts can contain residences in combination with stores and other permitted business or commercial uses.

Barrington, Rhode Island, desiring to create a village-style atmosphere in its business district and to expand housing options, recently amended its zoning bylaw to allow a mix of commercial and residential uses. The town’s bylaw now permits two-story buildings with residences located above commercial spaces.

Burlington, Vermont offers density bonuses for providing housing in its neighborhood activity centers. Neighborhood activity centers are small commercial centers that serve the surrounding neighborhoods.

Portland, Oregon’s zoning bylaw for the city’s “gateway plan district” requires that a comparable amount of housing be built with commercial development. These housing requirements are designed “to ensure that new housing is built at transit-supportive densities.”

Newmarket, New Hampshire has a minimum required building height and ten foot maximum setback in its village zoning district.

and allow structures with lower densities only in areas where development is less desirable.

- *Ensuring appropriate densities in*

residential areas of the town center. To generate a critical mass of people to sustain a vibrant town center, it is important that zoning bylaws ensure an appro-

priately high density of residential uses, such as by permitting only multi-family dwellings in town center districts where the highest residential densities are desired. (See **Cambridge, Mass.**)

ALLOW AND ENCOURAGE A MIX OF HOUSING TYPES. In addition to providing for a mix of uses, bylaws should allow, and encourage, a mix of housing types in town centers. A town's bylaws can address housing issues in a manner that encourages infill development by:

- *Allowing and encouraging a mix of housing types in downtown neighborhoods at higher residential densities.* Bylaws should allow multi-family homes, accessory apartments (i.e., live-in apartments contained within a house, garage

apartments, or backyard cottages), and appropriately scaled apartment buildings, to be integrated with existing single-family dwellings. The construction of new housing in town centers can be encouraged through incentive zoning, possibly in conjunction with a transferable development rights program. (See **Burlington, Vt., Portland, Ore., p.29 & Greenwich, Ct.**)

- *Imposing affordable housing requirements on new development projects.* Towns can adopt inclusionary zoning provisions in their bylaws, requiring new development projects of a certain size to include a certain amount of housing that is affordable for low- and moderate-income families. (See Appendix A for a discussion of inclusionary zoning.)

Towns can combine an inclusionary zoning requirement with an incentive zoning provision to allow developers to build in excess of what would be allowed under zoning, provided that the additional piece is affordable housing.

MINIMIZE THE AMOUNT OF DOWNTOWN LAND DEVOTED TO PARKING. Towns should minimize town center land devoted to parking. Parking lots create “dead spaces” which are detrimental to the cohesion and continuity of a town center, and consume land that otherwise could be put to uses that increase density, attract people downtown, and make the town center a more interesting place to be. According to Reid Ewing, a land use and transportation expert, “nine percent is said to be the upper limit on the amount of land area devoted to parking; beyond that, people sense that the environment is no longer theirs but rather belongs to automobiles.”

Towns should be careful about requiring that a certain amount of parking be built per development. Most developers and lenders have their own notions about how much parking is necessary, and they usually err on the high side. Bylaws can prevent the construction of unnecessary parking in town centers by:

- *Providing flexibility in the application of any minimum parking requirements.* It is best to avoid imposing minimum parking standards in the first place. If, however, such standards are to be imposed, they should avoid requiring excessive parking, and they should be flexible. For example, when a new development project is to be located in close proximity to transit, or can share off-street parking facilities with a neighboring building, any minimum parking requirements should be reduced accordingly. (See **Somerville, Mass.**)

- *Imposing maximum off-street parking limits, keyed to square footage and use.* Maximum off-street parking limits can

Cambridge, Massachusetts. New housing designed in a style consistent with the scale and materials of the neighborhood.

Dano Weisbord



avoid the needless use of downtown land for parking. Such limits should be designed to meet reasonable parking demands, as opposed to rare peak demands (i.e., the day after Thanksgiving). Developers should be permitted to exceed maximum parking limits only by demonstrating—either in a special permit or site plan review process—that all efforts have been made to minimize off-street parking needs, and that additional parking is still necessary.

- *Encouraging or requiring transportation demand management (“TDM”).* As its name suggests, transportation demand management involves efforts to manage transportation demand, rather than adding new or additional transportation infrastructure. Towns can require developers of new downtown projects to adopt TDM measures aimed at reducing the amount of off-street parking needed for a project. Such measures can include encouraging employees to commute by means other than single-occupant cars, or the use of stag-



Dana Weisbord

Somerville, Massachusetts. Parking between stores and sidewalks creates “dead zones” and can be unsafe.

gered work shifts. TDM requirements can be set forth in the zoning bylaws and required through a special permit process. (See **Amherst, Lexington, & Cambridge, Mass., Newmarket, N.H. & North Hempstead, N.Y., p.32**)

- *Encouraging developers to use or*

construct satellite parking lots. Satellite parking lots (i.e., parking lots located outside of a town center and serviced by shuttle buses or the like) can help minimize downtown parking. As an alternative to requiring developers to use or construct satellite parking lots,

FOR EXAMPLE

Barrington, Rhode Island recently amended its business district zoning bylaw to prohibit strip development. Barrington had required commercial uses to have a minimum 25-foot front setback, and imposed no maximum front setback. It also allowed parking lots to be located within that setback. To make its business district more pedestrian-friendly and compact, Barrington recently adopted a minimum setback of only 3 feet, a maximum set-back of 15 feet, and a prohibition against parking lots in front of buildings.

Cambridge, Massachusetts recently made amendments to its zoning bylaw that in some sections of the city allow higher densities for housing than for commercial uses. The city’s amendments also recognize that comparatively higher densities are appropriate in districts close to public transit stations.

Greenwich, Connecticut’s zoning bylaws contain accessory housing provisions for the purpose of “(i) benefiting elderly persons by promoting the availability and maintenance of housing; (ii) benefiting persons of moderate income by increasing the supply of affordable rental housing in the town; and (iii) helping to preserve older houses that give the town much of its attractive character.” The town’s bylaws allow accessory units in two situations: when the primary dwelling or the accessory apartment is occupied by the owner, and one of the units is occupied by a person who is at least 62 years of age, or, alternatively, when the accessory dwelling is rented as affordable housing.

Somerville, Massachusetts’ zoning bylaws recognize one of the important benefits of public transit—the ability to forgo the use of cars—by reducing its minimum parking requirements by 20% for any building located within 1,000 feet of a transit station. For buildings located within 650 feet of a municipal parking facility, the bylaws reduce the city’s minimum parking standard by 10 %.

FOR EXAMPLE

Amherst, Massachusetts requires that certain land uses providing 10 or more parking spaces must also provide bike racks.

Lexington, Massachusetts requires developers constructing large projects to prepare and implement a Transportation Demand Management Plan designed to reduce vehicle trips generated by the new project (especially commuter trips during peak travel periods).

Newmarket, New Hampshire has provisions in its site plan review bylaw to reduce on-site parking requirements for sites that provide bicycle and transit facilities.

North Hempstead, New York amended its zoning bylaws to provide that businesses in the town's industrial park district can apply for a permit to expand parking facilities only after making a good faith effort to solve their parking problems by other means. To satisfy the bylaws' "good faith effort" requirement, permit applicants must examine the feasibility of carpooling, vanpooling, transit use, telecommuting, compressed work schedules, bicycling, and walking. A permit applicant must also conduct an employee survey to determine the feasibility of a cash-in-lieu of parking program, in which employees are provided additional compensation in exchange for using alternative transportation.

Cambridge, Massachusetts allows the construction or expansion of parking facilities with twenty or more non-residential parking spaces only for projects that have prepared and obtained approval of a Parking and Transportation Management Plan. To gain the city's approval, the plan must be designed to minimize the amount of parking demand associated with the project, and to reduce single-occupant vehicle trips in and around Cambridge. Smaller projects involving 5 to 19 parking spaces are required to implement at least three parking and transportation demand management measures.

Portsmouth, New Hampshire has a trolley system that serves satellite parking lots located outside downtown. The system operates six days per week (Monday through Saturday), from mid-May until mid-September. Recently, a large employer located in Portsmouth's downtown agreed to subsidize year-round service to satellite parking lots, to address limited parking for its employees.

Manchester, New Hampshire recently reconfigured Elm Street—the city's primary downtown street—by replacing much of its on-street parallel parking with angle parking. This change, which also included reducing travel lanes on Elm Street from four lanes to three, increased parking capacity on Elm Street by approximately 25%, and has provided a traffic-calming effect that has resulted in slower traffic and a safer pedestrian environment.

developers can be permitted or required to contribute to an off-street parking fund for the development of public, off-street satellite parking. **(See Portsmouth, N.H.)**

In addition to regulatory approaches to minimizing downtown parking, towns can address parking issues through a number of non-regulatory means, such as by:

- *Providing on-street parking on downtown streets.* On-street parking reduces the need for off-street parking. Where the street is wide enough, angle-parking is preferable to parallel parking, because it maximizes the number of parking spaces that can fit on a street. On-street parking also creates better pedestrian-friendly streets, by creating a barrier between the street and the sidewalk. On-street parking, and particularly on-street *angle* parking, also has a traffic calming effect, as drivers must slow down to accommodate cars pulling in and out of parking spaces. **(See Manchester, N.H.)**

- *Providing public transit and making streets more accommodating to bicyclists.* Each of these approaches reduces the number of cars accessing a town center, thereby reducing the demand for parking.

- *Constructing public parking garages.* Parking garages concentrate parking spaces, thereby reducing the amount of land needed for parking lots. Towns taking this approach should take care in choosing the location and design of parking garages, to avoid creating traffic problems in the town center, as well as the creation of "dead space."

- *Providing satellite parking in appropriate places outside of the town center.* See discussion of satellite parking, above.

ADOPT PROCEDURES THAT ENCOURAGE INFILL DEVELOPMENT. The process of obtaining necessary approvals and permits can represent a substantial cost to developers, both in time and expense. Adopting procedures that reduce these



Dana Welshford

Somerville, Massachusetts. Davis Square has experienced a significant revitalization as a result of pedestrian-friendly development oriented around a subway stop constructed in 1985.

costs, thereby encouraging developers to pursue projects in town centers instead of outlying rural or suburban areas, is a useful way to encourage infill development. One mechanism for accomplishing this goal is to streamline the permitting process for appropriate downtown projects, to reduce the time and expense of obtaining requisite approvals. This can be accomplished by:

- *Providing an accelerated permit process for projects satisfying certain local needs or goals.* Projects can be encouraged to locate in town centers, and to satisfy certain community goals (such as providing needed elderly and/or affordable housing, or locating on a site that will enhance the use of existing or proposed transit facilities), through incentive zoning provisions which accelerate the process for obtaining local permits.

- *Adopting “by-right” regulations.* By-right zoning bylaws provide detailed, objective standards which, when met, entitle the developer to a permit. Such streamlined regulations are most appropriate for smaller, non-controversial projects which do not involve environmentally sensitive sites, and which will not alter the character of a neighborhood. By providing sufficiently precise, objective standards, by-right bylaws provide developers with greater

certainty that their projects, assuming they satisfy the enumerated standards, will be approved.

ENCOURAGE INFILL DEVELOPMENT SERVED BY TRANSIT. Public transit can be an important catalyst for infill development and the creation of vibrant town centers. This is particularly the case when transit-oriented development (i.e., high density, mixed use development which is pedestrian-friendly and which simultaneously encourages the use of public transit and reduces the use of cars) is required or encouraged in areas near rail stations and transit stops. In addition to the many regulatory standards and tools discussed above that relate to town centers generally, towns should encourage transit-oriented development in areas near transit stations by:

- *Prohibiting uses that encourage automobile use.* Land uses such as distribution centers, rental car facilities, gas stations, automobile repair shops, car washes, commercial parking lots, and businesses with drive-through windows, all encourage the use of automobiles. Prohibiting such uses is essential to maintaining a pedestrian-friendly environment within the “TOD” zone, and to encouraging the use of public transit.

- *Establishing design standards that support public transit.* Design standards that contribute to the pedestrian-friendly nature of the area (such as prohibiting parking between sidewalks and storefronts), and that maximize access to and from nearby transit facilities (such as requiring building entrances to be located as near as possible to transit stations) are important aspects of TOD development. (See **Portland, Ore., p.35.**)

Make Your Town Center Pedestrian-Friendly

Towns that have centers that are interesting and enjoyable places to walk can increase pedestrian activity, reduce car traffic, and create a lively atmosphere which supports downtown businesses and enhances the convenience and quality of life downtown. As noted in Chapter 2, there are a number of non-regulatory steps that towns can take to make their streets more pedestrian-friendly. But there are also a number of steps that towns can take through local bylaws that can help make their centers pedestrian-friendly places. Many of these regulatory steps—such as permitting, encouraging or requiring higher densities, mixed uses and compact development; and reducing the amount of downtown land devoted to parking—are discussed earlier in this chapter. Some additional regulatory techniques are as follows:

ADOPT DESIGN STANDARDS THAT FOSTER CONVENIENT PEDESTRIAN ACCESS.

Towns can adopt design standards requiring new buildings to have main entrances on, and direct sidewalk connections to, the streets on which they are located. Such standards should prohibit the construction of parking lots between buildings and streets. Such a prohibition is important to prevent the unnecessary obstruction of pedestrian access, to maintain a sense that buildings are connected to and part of the streetscape, and to avoid dead spaces. (See **Newmarket, N.H.**)

ADOPT DESIGN STANDARDS THAT MAKE DOWNTOWN APPEALING. To ensure that downtown is a visually interesting, aesthetically pleasing place to be, new buildings should be required to have multiple street-level windows (with see-through glass) that are oriented to the street.

ADOPT DESIGN STANDARDS TO MINIMIZE IMPACTS OF LARGE BUILDINGS. Buildings that take up a lot of street frontage can detract from the pedestrian environment of a town center. To make these buildings more appealing for passers-by, design standards can require numerous windows and multiple entrances oriented to the street. (See **Brunswick, Me.**)

Strategy Tips

It's not unusual for a new approach to development to generate concerns among residents. With respect to encouraging development in town centers, local concerns often focus on measures designed to increase density. Many people think they dislike dense development, yet when they

have a chance to see examples of attractive city, town center, and village neighborhoods with a range of densities, their thinking can evolve. To educate residents on the benefits of increasing densities in town centers, and to minimize opposition that is based on unfounded fears, towns should employ the following approaches.

Involve Residents in Developing a Vision for Their Community

As discussed in Chapter 2, the best way to get people accustomed to change is to let them participate in determining what changes should occur. This means engaging the community in a planning process *before* there is a controversial proposed project to consider. Whenever possible, tools such as three-dimensional visualization software, drawings, manipulated photography, and pictures of alternative development patterns should be used to assist in this visioning process. Historic photographs of your town center also can be a powerful tool, as many New England town centers used to be more densely developed than they are today. Check with

your local library or historical society for photographs from the late 1800s or early 1900s; you might be pleasantly surprised to see a more lively, more densely developed version of your town center. These photographs and other images should help to get people more comfortable with the look and feel of appropriately scaled and designed infill development.

Engage Residents in Discussion of Proposed New Bylaws Early in the Process

When it comes to land use proposals, especially ones that are perceived as having the potential to transform a section of town, people dislike surprises. To avoid these surprises, it is important to work with a neighborhood *before* proposing regulatory changes that could alter the character of that neighborhood. Otherwise, the town may face endless challenges to planning decisions by residents who feel threatened by projects proposed under new regulations.

Build on Existing Patterns

Peoples' concerns with density can be addressed through good designs that build on familiar patterns. This does not mean that exact replicas of historic buildings need to be built, but rather that the height, size, site arrangement, facades, and materials of new buildings can be reflective of historic features.

Address Concerns Regarding the Loss of Open Space

Residents faced with the prospect of higher densities in town centers often are concerned that they will lose valuable open space resources. This concern should be addressed by ensuring that green space, parks and playgrounds will be provided, and will be protected from development.



Somerville, Massachusetts. Union Square, circa 1905–1912.

Photograph by Thomson and Thomson. Courtesy of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities.

Figure 7: How Dense Is Dense?

Minimum lot size—one measure of density—has increased dramatically over the years, due in part to local zoning requirements. The following is a comparison of historic lot sizes with minimums required under local bylaws, as averaged for five Vermont towns.

Average Minimum Lot Sizes

USE TYPE	HISTORIC	ZONING
Single family	4,800 sq. ft.	10,000 sq. ft.
Multi-family	3,700 sq. ft./unit	5,600 sq. ft./unit
Municipal/civic	5,000 sq. ft.	NA
Commercial	4,570 sq. ft.	20,000 sq. ft.
Industrial	5,300 sq. ft.	100,000 sq. ft.

Reprinted from: Vermont Forum on Sprawl, *Growing Smart, Best Site Planning for Residential, Commercial, and Industrial Development*, Burlington, VT, 2001. Source for data in table: T.J. Boyle & Assoc. and RESV, Inc., *Workbook for Estimating Land Area Needs*, VT Dept. of Housing & Community Affairs, Growth Center Pilot Project, May 1995.

FOR EXAMPLE

Portland, Oregon's "gateway plan district," which is intended to provide for "an intensive level of mixed-use development including retail, office, and housing to support light rail transit stations," provides detailed standards to accomplish these goals. For example, it requires that sites be designed to have sidewalks connecting a building's entrance with the street, and that such sidewalks be free of obstacles and "no longer than the straight line distance from the entrance to the closest sidewalk." It also requires that proposed sites that abut a light rail alignment "must have their main entrance facing the light rail alignment." Buildings within 200 feet of a light rail station or transit stop must be designed to have their main entrance as close as possible to the rail facility or transit stop.

Newmarket, New Hampshire has adopted design standards that require buildings to have entrances on the streets they face and that prohibit parking between buildings and the sidewalk.

Brunswick, Maine has design standards that require large retailers to have ground floor facades facing public streets, with display windows, entrance areas, and other design features along at least 40% of their horizontal length. Brunswick also requires these stores to have clearly marked pedestrian entranceways and appropriate sidewalks and bicycle amenities, and uses the site plan review process to ensure that these standards are implemented.

Be Part of the Solution

Join CLF today!

Founded in 1966, the Conservation Law Foundation is a nonprofit, member-supported organization that works to solve the environmental problems that threaten the people, natural resources, and communities of New England. CLF's advocates use law, economics, and science to design and implement strategies that conserve natural resources, protect public health, and promote vital communities in our region.



Yes! I want to help CLF protect New England's environment and communities.

- \$30 (Membership Dues)
 \$50
 \$100
 \$250
 \$500
 Other \$ _____

Name _____

Street _____

City/State/Zip _____

Email _____

Phone _____

- My employer participates in a matching gift program.

Payment Options

Log on to www.CLF.org to make an online donation!

- Check
 Mastercard
 Visa

Card # _____

Exp. Date ____ / ____ Sig. _____

Please fill out this form and send it to:
 Membership Center,
 62 Summer Street,
 Boston, Massachusetts
 02110-1016.
 Fax (617) 350-4030

For more information on CLF, please call (800) 370-0697 e-mail members@clf.org

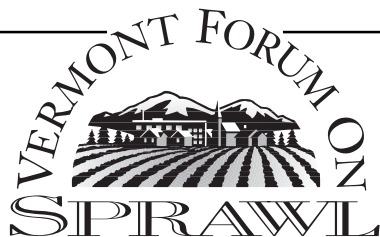
or log on to www.CLF.org

Your contribution is tax-deductible to the extent provided by law. Thank You!

I would like my donation to support CLF's work:

- Across New England
or in

- Maine
 Massachusetts
 New Hampshire
 Rhode Island
 Vermont



The mission of the Vermont Forum on Sprawl is to preserve Vermont's unique working landscape and quality of life while encouraging economic development in community centers, through:

1. research and communications,
2. public policy development,
3. community tools and demonstration projects,
4. building creative and diverse partnerships.

WHY DO WE NEED A VERMONT FORUM ON SPRAWL?

- ✓ To discourage wasteful land consumption.
- ✓ To provide more transportation choices.
- ✓ To minimize public costs of development.
- ✓ To conserve valuable farmland and forestland.
- ✓ To promote downtowns and village centers.
- ✓ To provide diverse housing choices.

...and to protect the unique character of Vermont...compact settlements separated by rural countryside.

I would like to help preserve Vermont's rural landscape and encourage Smart Growth development with a tax-deductible donation of:

- Smart Growth Innovator \$1000
 Community Builder 500
 Coalition Advocate 100
 Planning Promoter 50
 Sprawl Buster 30
 Other \$ _____

Please make checks payable to the Vermont Forum on Sprawl.

All donations of \$30 or greater will receive 20% off Community Rules.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____

STATE _____ ZIP _____

PHONE _____

EMAIL _____

For more information on the Vermont Forum on Sprawl, visit our website at www.vtsprawl.org, or contact us at 110 Main St., Burlington, Vt 05401 • Tel 802.864.6310 • Fax 802.862.4487 • Email info@vtsprawl.org