PRINCIPLE 6: Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas
Smart Growth for Small Towns Series

Smart Growth for Small Towns is a cooperative project between the Extension Service faculty of the Department of Landscape Architecture and the Stennis Institute of Government and Community Development at Mississippi State University.

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Introduction

Smart Growth for Small Towns relates the principles of Smart Growth to towns and rural communities, providing examples, discussion, explanation and advice on community design and development.

The educational information provided on this site is intended to contribute to an understanding of the intent and purpose of the Smart Growth principles. However, planning for the future of our small towns requires input from a variety of fields and includes issues of design, policy making and governance. This series is focused primarily upon design issues associated with small towns and is intended to serve as a resource for government officials, teachers, designers, and the general public.

The explanation of each Smart Growth principle includes the following:

A. Discussion of the purpose of the principles and why it is important.

B. Strategies that communities can use to help achieve the goals of the principle.

TEN PRINCIPLES OF SMART GROWTH:

1. Mix land uses
2. Take advantage of compact building design
3. Create a range of housing opportunities and choices
4. Create walkable neighborhoods
5. Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place
6. Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas
7. Strengthen and direct development toward existing communities
8. Provide a variety of transportation choices
9. Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost effective
10. Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration in development decisions
A. DISCUSSION

Why is it important?

Maintaining the memorable and unique landscape features of our communities just makes sense. Unfortunately, valuable natural and agricultural areas are some of the most affected by poor planning and automobile-focused development. While the benefits of the landscape can be hard to measure and challenging to communicate, there are many good reasons to preserve such areas. Open spaces are critical for recreation and have a positive impact on public health through active living. Conserving land and soil that is useful for agriculture is necessary not only to sustain future access to healthy food but also to maintain our culture and a way of life that many find meaningful. Preserving environmental features such as streams, wetlands, prairies and woodlands is essential for clean air and water and necessary for maintaining diverse and healthy populations of fish and wildlife. As much as we may use and value these areas, preserving them is a sizeable challenge requiring considerable community will and dedication, especially where there is development pressure and high land values. Yet the effort to preserve the land we’ve inherited is essential to ensure that future generations have a high quality of life and access to the beauty and meaning found in nature.

SMART COMMUNITIES PRINCIPLE 6:
Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas
B. STRATEGIES

Identify critical landscape features and character

Deciding what’s most important to the community is a first, important step to conserving it. Often, we take for granted the special aspects of our communities and don’t think much about them until they’re threatened. Devising an inclusive process to identify the places that your community finds meaningful is a good first step.

Promote and incentivize dense, infill development in existing town centers

There are lots of good reasons to focus on developing our existing town centers including that they promote walkability, benefit existing commercial development and reduce infrastructure costs (and therefore taxes). But one of the most important reasons to promote infill development is to prevent unnecessary, poorly planned development from destroying valuable environmental features and farmland. Every residence or business that’s built in town is one more that isn’t built on the farms, fields or woodlands that make our rural areas so special and compelling.

Consider a growth or services boundary

Growth or services limits are controversial but in some cases they can be a means to limit encroachment upon natural and agricultural areas. In some communities, natural boundaries such as rivers and flood plains can limit development and force a community to build more compactly. Where these natural boundaries don’t exist, it may be necessary for a community to limit its long-term infrastructure costs by establishing a judicious service boundary. In all cases, annexation of new land into existing communities should be carefully weighed against the long-term environmental and financial costs associated with extensive suburban land development.

Consider compromise solutions through design

We can’t save every natural or agricultural area nor do we want to make development so expensive that it prices many of our citizens out of the market. It’s important to prioritize and to consider some compromise solutions through design. Cluster development is one approach that can allow owners to develop their property while still preserving the most critical environmental or agricultural features. New communities can be designed to conserve natural features, incorporate agricultural components and provide a high quality of life for residents. But it’s important that these new developments are dense, walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods that contribute to the community’s long-term quality of life.
Impervious surfaces increase runoff. This increase can cause erosion and flooding, damaging waterways and property. Development can also cause stormwater to become contaminated with pollutants. Fertilizers, pesticides, sediment, pet waste and heavy metals from automobiles or roof shingles all can affect water quality. Managing and treating stormwater on-site is the best way to mitigate these impacts. Communities should consider ordinances that can protect against non-point source pollution and that require each new development to limit impervious surfaces and retain stormwater. When designed properly, rainwater becomes a resource and not a waste product and our streams, lakes and wetlands are protected for future generations.

The Oktibbeha County Heritage Museum in Starkville, Mississippi, demonstrates appropriate stormwater management practices. The museum’s landscape includes rain gardens, a cistern to store water for irrigation, a pavilion with a green roof and a stormwater planter that retains and treats runoff from the roof of the museum. Mississippi State University landscape architecture, landscape contracting, architecture, and graphic design students constructed the exhibits (Photographs: ©2014 Michael Seymour).
Jeremy Murdock is a Research Associate II with the John C. Stennis Institute of Government and Community Development at Mississippi State University. He is heavily involved in ground-level community development issues, especially those related to design and planning. His current work is aimed at educating the communities of Mississippi about sound design and planning principles and their impact on economic development.

Mr. Murdock, a native of Olive Branch, Mississippi, obtained both a bachelor’s and master’s degree in landscape architecture from Mississippi State University. Following graduate school, Mr. Murdock entered the world of community development and has worked with numerous Mississippi communities. He is passionate about downtown revitalization and small town development, and he uses design as a tool to enhance the quality of life in the communities of the state.

Mr. Murdock is heavily entrenched in community development, both professionally and personally. He is an active volunteer and advocate for quality of life issues and serves on numerous boards and committees in his own community of Starkville, Mississippi. These include the Planning and Zoning Commission, Convention and Visitors Bureau Board of Directors, and the Starkville Main Street Design Committee. In recent years he also served on the Starkville Area Arts Council Board of Directors, Starkville in Motion Board of Directors, and the Starkville Beautification Committee among others.

Michael W. Seymour is an Associate Extension Professor and the Graduate Coordinator in the Department of Landscape Architecture at Mississippi State University where he has taught a wide variety of courses including landscape graphics, history of landscape architecture, golf course design and both undergraduate and graduate design studios. He has an undergraduate degree in fine art from Centenary College of Louisiana and a Master’s degree in Landscape Architecture from Louisiana State University. He is a licensed landscape architect and has prior professional experience in the public sector as the Director of an Arts District and in private practice at Lucido and Associates in Stuart, Florida. His practice experiences included a wide variety of neighborhood, commercial, civic, institutional and residential developments. His research has focused on landscape history, including the evolution and growth of small towns and the courthouse squares of Mississippi. Professor Seymour’s teaching has been recognized with a number of awards including the university’s highest teaching honor, the Grisham Master Teacher award, and the national Excellence in Teaching recognition of the Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture. He has been involved in many teaching training sessions and workshops for faculty and currently serves as Faculty Associate with MSU’s Center for Teaching Learning.