PRINCIPLE 7: Strengthen and direct development toward existing communities
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
SMART COMMUNITIES PRINCIPLE 7:
Strengthen and direct development toward existing communities

A. DISCUSSION

What is the current situation?

Over the past few decades, many cities have been desperate for any type of growth. The cost of infrastructure, police protection, fire protection, city government, education, and other expenses have continued to rise. Cities rely on their tax base to fund everything from basic needs to added amenities for their residents. So cities seeing an increase in expenses needed an increase in revenue (i.e. taxes).

Since the 1950s, most American cities saw that new growth take the form of suburban sprawl. This form of development was very different than the development of the past. Instead of dense urban-style buildings, commercial businesses were located in strip malls and outdoor shopping centers. Residents relocated from walkable downtown neighborhoods to cul-de-sac subdivisions on the edge of town. As the downtown core began to crumble, the highway corridors and edges of town began to flourish. This new growth created the increase tax base needed to support the failing infrastructure of the previous generation.

Along with the new growth came new infrastructure. The suburban sprawl pattern of development grows horizontally rather than vertically, so it requires much more land area than the traditional style of development. As cities encouraged more and more growth on the edge of town, they annexed more land, extended their utilities, and added much more infrastructure. In addition to the infrastructure, all of this new land meant that the cities needed to add more services. So the increase in tax base also meant an increase in expenditure.

As long as cities were experiencing new growth, they were able to keep up with the cost of the new infrastructure, services, and existing infrastructure. Also, in many occasions state or federal funds were available to build infrastructure for the new development. However, once the growth began to slow down, cities did not have enough revenue to support the vast infrastructure that had been built. They became reliant on the revenue generated by new growth to support the existing infrastructure. When new growth slowed down, cities became desperate. The growth and desperation eras can be seen when studying historic events and economic cycles throughout the last several decades. Events such as the world wars and Great Depression in the early 1900s, recession and oil crisis in the 1970s, the September 11th tragedy in the early 2000s, and the Great Recession at the end of the 2010s either ended periods of extensive growth or triggered times of desperation for cities.

These periods of desperation caused city governments to shift the priorities that guided their decisions. Historically cities made decisions based on what would build wealth for their community, but during the suburban sprawl era, cities were merely desperate to
pay the bills anyway possible. So instead of focusing on building wealth, cities began searching for easy cash. Rapid growth provided that easy cash and cities lost sight of the long-term consequences of sprawling further and further from the city core.

Currently many cities find themselves with extensive acreage within their city limits and vast amounts of infrastructure to maintain. Many also have a blighted downtown core and a highway commercial corridor that they view as an eyesore. Despite decades of growth, they are struggling to provide the services and offer the amenities that the residents expect.

Why should cities direct development toward the existing community?

Many cities regardless of population or location are struggling, but how did the way these cities develop impact their current financial situation? By growing further and further away from the city core, cities added miles of infrastructure and acres of land that must be maintained forever. That is a very long-term commitment from a local government standpoint.

The argument can be made that capitalizing on that growth allowed the cities to drastically increase their sales tax base. While this is true and many cities were able to greatly increase the revenue in their budgets, these cities also added extensive amounts of infrastructure and services (costs). So in the end their sales tax revenue increased, but their expenses did as well.

Rapid growth provided easy cash and cities lost sight of the long-term consequences of sprawling further and further from the city core.

Many cities have capitalized on cheap land, cheap oil prices, and federal or state funding for infrastructure over the past few decades. This allowed city officials to make decisions based on short-term factors rather than considering the long-term impacts. For example, many cities chose cheap land on the edge of the city limits for schools and parks. At the time that made sense because the land was cheaper than in the center of the community. However, by locating these key civic facilities on the outskirts of the community, citizens are forced to drive to these locations. Since driving is the only option for every visitor, extensive infrastructure must be built to accommodate the new traffic. So even though the land was cheaper, the costs associated with those decisions are greater than areas in the city core.

In addition to the infrastructure costs, the social impacts of sprawling development are far greater. By forcing all residents to drive from location to location, a large number of the population is neglected. Development that spreads horizontally only appeals to the residents that own automobiles. However, low-income residents, senior citizens, and children are often not included in that group; therefore, a large portion of the city’s population is unable to enjoy the amenities in these areas.

B. STRATEGIES

Strategies for strengthening and directing development toward existing communities

Make decisions based on the long-term interests of all citizens rather than short-term interests.

So many community leaders are desperate for any type of progress that they never take the time to evaluate the true impact of their decisions. The short-term gains generated by certain developments can have devastating long-term impacts to the community. The locations of new schools and parks, the demolition of historic sites, and other developments are some examples that are often based solely on the immediate benefits.

The location of a new school is a commonly debated topic in many communities. Although having the resources to build a new facility is a tremendous blessing, the decision on where to locate that facility is very difficult. Unfortunately the trend seems to be that community leaders make that decision based solely on the cost of the land. When that is the guiding factor, the land on the outskirts of the community will almost always be the leading candidate. However, when other factors are considered (infrastructure costs, transportation costs, social impacts, health impacts, walkability, etc.) the decision may not be as clear. Locating a new school facility on the outskirts of the community could have some of the following impacts on the community:

- Every employee and student of the school is forced to drive to the facility; the citizens have no other option.
- The requirement to drive triggers the need for expensive and expansive infrastructure such as large roadways and parking lots.
- The increased driving and time in a car has devastating social and health impacts to the community (automobile accidents, lack of exercise, sedentary lifestyle, etc.).
- The new facility will likely spur residential and commercial development on the adjacent land, which further increases the amount of infrastructure needed to serve the area.
- The driving requirement may alienate the lower income student population whose families cannot afford the automobile costs, which could increase the dropout rate for that demographic.
Once all of the above factors are debated, leaders may find that although a more central location may be more costly in the short-term, the long-term benefits will be much more valuable and have a higher return on investment for the community as a whole.

The graphic below illustrates one community’s decision to locate a new elementary school facility out on the edge of the community rather than in the existing core area. The yellow star represents the new school facility, the blue circle denotes the historic downtown district, and finally the area outlined in green are the core neighborhoods. While the actual factors of this decision are unknown, some impacts can be analyzed without detailed information. Most of the residents and commercial areas are located within the green boundary. So by locating the facility to the extreme north of the city, a few impacts are known:

1. Most current residents will be forced to drive several miles daily.
2. Residents without an automobile are automatically placed in a difficult situation.
3. Extensive roadway infrastructure will be required to support the increased traffic.
4. New residential and commercial development will begin to occur adjacent to the new school facility, which will require additional infrastructure to be extended into this underdeveloped portion of the community.
5. The school facility will require the development of massive parking and automobile infrastructure to support the large amount of traffic.

Additional conclusions may be drawn from this, but it is important for community leaders to examine all of the potential positive and negative impacts of a particular decision related to civic facilities.

Similarly, community leaders follow the same pattern when selecting sites for new park and sportsplex facilities. When the decision is based solely on the land costs, many of the citizens suffer as a result. When a park is located on the outskirts of the community, the following results may be seen:

- All users are required to drive to the facility with no other option.
- The requirement to drive triggers the need for expensive and expansive infrastructure such as large roadways and parking lots.
- The requirement to drive also increases the traffic congestion on other local roadways.
- Only the middle and upper-income residents can enjoy the facility because of the associated automobile costs.
- Other segments of the community’s population, such as the elderly, children, and teenagers, are also negatively impacted because of the driving requirement.
- Secluded parks are also much more susceptible to safety and vandalism issues since there are no “eyes on the street” to monitor the park.

This community chose to locate its large community sports park on some county-owned land along the major highway. While the park is easily accessible by automobile, no residents are able to walk or bike at the park because it is located in such a rural area. As seen in the illustration to the right, the historic downtown area (blue circle) and the core neighborhoods (outlined in green) are located well over a mile from the park (yellow star). These types of decisions greatly impact the residents of the community and all factors should be discussed.
Choosing to locate a public park along the highway far from the existing core of the community greatly impacts the users of the park, especially those who do not own an automobile. Children, teenagers, senior citizens, and lower income residents will have difficulty utilizing the park because it is not accessible by foot. (Illustration: ©2014 Jeremy Murdock; Map: ©2014 Google Maps)

Columbus, Mississippi, chose to locate a large soccer park on some vacant property directly adjacent to the historic downtown area in the core of the community. For nearly a decade, the community debated between choosing this location or some land on the outskirts of the city adjacent to the major highway. They chose to create a central community park that is within walking distance of the existing neighborhoods, downtown area, and commercial district. The park cannot only be reached by automobile but also by bicycle or on foot.

By locating their park in a central location, this community has given all citizens, regardless of socioeconomic status, the opportunity to enjoy this amenity. In addition, businesses in the adjacent downtown area are able to capitalize off of the increased activity and surrounding property become more valuable due to the proximity of the park. (Illustration: ©2014 Jeremy Murdock; Map: ©2014 Google Maps)
Finally, many historic sites and structures have been lost forever due to a decision desperately made to capture some form of short-term gain. The beautiful historic Oktibbeha County Courthouse was demolished in the 1960s because the supervisors at the time felt that it was too costly to heat and cool the facility. A much smaller and less impressive facility was built in its place.

One of the best examples of this can be found in Monroeville, Alabama. Monroeville is a small rural community (population 6,300) with a quaint courthouse square and historic neighborhoods. The significance of this small town is that it was the home to two of the most influential modern-day authors in American history. Harper Lee, author of To Kill a Mockingbird, was born and raised in the community and currently lives in a retirement facility in Monroeville. Her novel was very much based on her childhood, and it is evident that Monroeville served as the model for the fictional town of “Maycomb.”

Lee won a Pulitzer Price for the novel, and over 1 million copies of To Kill a Mockingbird are sold every year worldwide. Students are required to read the novel every year across the country, and it is considered to be one of the most influential books of all time. Approximately 30,000 people visit Monroeville every year because of its connection to the novel.

Coincidentally one of Lee’s childhood friends also became a world-renowned author. Truman Capote, author of In Cold Blood and Breakfast at Tiffany’s, spent many childhood summers visiting his aunts who lived next door to the Lee family. Capote, who was a well-known socialite as well as author, was lifelong friends with Lee until his death in the 1980s.

So two of the most well-known modern-day authors grew up together in a small, rural Alabama town. The community has worked very hard to capitalize on their most famous residents. The historic courthouse was saved from demolition during the 1970s and renovated into a Harper Lee and Truman Capote museum. They host historic walking tours, annual performances of the To Kill a Mockingbird play, and other events to honor the history. However, one of the biggest missed opportunities is related to the childhood homes of Lee and Capote’s aunts.
Apparently, like many historic structures, the two homes experienced a period of neglect and eventually fell into disrepair. As years went by, the neighborhood street was converted to a higher speed roadway to accommodate the increased automobile traffic during the 1950s. Slowly the neighborhood properties were converted into businesses catering to the customers who were now driving through the area instead of walking.

At some point, in the name of growth and progress, the community allowed the authors’ homes to be demolished and redeveloped. The site of the Lee home now offers Mel’s Dairy Dream, a 1950s-style milkshake and hamburger drive-through. The site of Capote’s family’s home is vacant with only the remnants of a stone wall and the foundation remaining. The State of Alabama has placed a historical marker on the site to preserve the history of the sites, but the homes have been lost forever. Imagine the tourism and economic development potential of those two sites if the homes still remained. It is unlikely that the revenue generated by Mel’s Dairy Dream would out perform the childhood homes of two of America’s, and possibly the world’s, greatest authors. A decision accounting only for short-term gains has now hindered the entire community from capitalizing on its largest assets.

Encourage infill development rather than expansive development along the city’s edge.

Many cities struggle to identify strategies for improving vacant buildings, vacant lots, and undeveloped properties while praising all of the new development along the outskirts. In reality the underutilized properties in the core area of town are already serviced by infrastructure. Since those properties are not active, the tax base is more than likely too low to fund the necessary infrastructure maintenance and repairs. Rather than increasing the tax base to fund improvements to existing infrastructure, the new development along the edge is adding new infrastructure that will also require maintenance and improvements in the future.

Encouraging development to locate in areas with existing infrastructure will make more efficient use of city resources rather than committing to future liabilities. New development should be encouraged to locate in vacant lots or vacant buildings. Businesses should also be encouraged to renovate their existing facilities rather than abandoning them for a new location on the edge of the city.
Lead by example. Locate municipal facilities within the city core.

Another trend that can be seen around many rural communities is the relocation of municipal facilities. These facilities may include city hall, courthouse, post office, police department, or other core governmental services. Historically all of these facilities were built as the foundation of the community and made up the central core of the city. Most of the facilities served, and continue to serve, as key landmark buildings for the community. The structures were built with long-lasting materials, and the architecture exuded a sense of pride that can still be observed today.

As the historic facilities begin to age, communities are forced to weigh the options needed to accommodate present day demands. Factors including updating the heating and cooling units, need for additional office space, increased demand for parking space, and other issues become part of the discussion. Oftentimes the debate is between renovating and expanding the existing historic structure and relocating to a new facility elsewhere in the community. The costs of renovating the existing facility often seem very high related to the costs of a new facility on cheap land along the outskirts of the community. However, just like the discussion with schools and parks, the true costs of the decision are never fully discussed.

The discussion usually focuses on the cost of renovations versus the cost of new land. However, there are many other effects of the decision that can greatly impact the community, and those impacts should be discussed. With suburban sprawl pulling most of the retail businesses out to the highway corridors, many rural downtowns are left with a small collection of commercial establishments and the core governmental facilities. The governmental facilities are many times the main traffic generator and anchor of the downtown area. The city hall brings in residents to conduct city business. The post office attracts numerous residents to the area for service as well. These facilities could be the lifeblood of the downtown area and the only reason that the remaining businesses are able to survive. Removing these core services could have a devastating impact to the core downtown area of the community.

The potential impact to the tax base of downtown as well as the impacts similar to schools and parks listed above could have substantial long-term impacts on the community that would vastly outweigh the short-term cost savings of relocating the facilities on property outside of the community’s core.

The small town of Pelahatchie, Mississippi, (population 1,362) decided to invest in the existing downtown core rather than relocating central services to the highway corridor where the land is less expensive. The choice to renovate a downtown building to house the police department and to invest in and expand the existing library facility, the town government shows that it is leading by example. The town has also invested in two nearby parks, which include free public WiFi, and renovated an abandoned and dilapidated building into a community center. These investments demonstrated that the town was dedicated to preserving and enhancing the downtown area as well as exhibited a sense of pride in the civic facilities. This pride and investment has created a “domino effect” with surrounding properties as almost all have experienced physical improvements over the past few years. (Photograph: ©2008 Jeremy Murdock)
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.

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