SMART COMMUNITIES
HOW TO APPLY SMART GROWTH PRINCIPLES TO RURAL COMMUNITIES

PRINCIPLE 8: Provide a variety of transportation choices

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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 for a community to have transportation options?

If you’ve ever been without a car for a few days, you are keenly aware of how far we’ve gone in designing our communities solely for automobile transportation. While for most this is a minor inconvenience, for those who can’t afford a car or lack the ability to drive, it can be debilitating. Teenagers and the elderly, in particular, suffer from the exclusive focus on private auto transportation, which can make them feel like prisoners in their own homes and lead to unnecessary isolation and lack of independence. Even for those who can drive, the exclusive focus on automobile-oriented development can result in lost productivity and frustration due to the extended commute times between work, home and shopping. So what’s a community to do? While dense, walkable neighborhoods are a big part of the solution (see principle four) providing a variety of transportation choices is another part of the answer.

How can small towns provide transportation variety?

In most towns and communities, providing even one additional option would go a long way to improving livability. For smaller communities, the alternatives consist mainly of biking and public bus service. Both of these options can be beneficial in reducing greenhouse gases from auto emissions but a focus on biking also has the added benefit of encouraging physical activity and a healthy lifestyle. However, biking is not an option for everyone and some form of public transit is extraordinarily helpful for those who are elderly, disabled or unable to afford the considerable expense of owning a car. As communities, we are responsible for the environment we’ve built; when this environment is unworkable for many of our citizens, we also bear responsibility for mitigating the problem. Public transit can be a lifeline for many, providing additional employment opportunities and the chance to complete basic essential tasks like grocery shopping or medical appointments that most of us take for granted. Involving as many community members as possible in the discussion of public transit will help to ensure that the most prudent, affordable and effective options are selected. Keep in mind that fixed route services are
not the only option and that demand-response services that respond to specific requests may be a more flexible and effective solution for small towns and rural areas.

B. STRATEGIES

Promote cycling through dedicated bike paths and traffic calming

Riding a bike should be healthful and fun. Unfortunately, in many communities it’s not only un-enjoyable but also quite dangerous. If you’re going to make bicycling attractive, you have to make riders feel safe and relatively confident that they aren’t going to run into conflicts with cars or drivers. In some cases, this can be as simple as re-striping the existing roadway to create a dedicated bike lane, but on faster moving roadways, it may be prudent to consider separate bike paths. Although sharing the roadway is a legal requirement, it isn’t the best way to encourage bicycling; this is especially true for younger children, those new to cycling and older adults.

Encouraging cycling is similar to promoting walking in that it requires some moderation of car traffic. Reducing the speed of automobiles has many benefits that can make communities more livable; this concept is often referred to as “traffic calming.” Traffic calming is an approach that takes advantage of our natural tendency to drive more cautiously (and therefore more slowly) on streets that are designed to be narrow, busy and somewhat unpredictable. In nearly all cases, slower speeds can be achieved through the design techniques (such as use of on-street parking) without relying on restrictive speed limits, caution signs or speed bumps. While traffic calming may not be appropriate on all roadways, it is necessary in cases where cyclists are sharing the road.

The digital before and after rendering above illustrates how over-engineered, extremely wide roadways can be transformed by restriping the lanes. This simple, cost-effective strategy can transform an unsafe, high-speed road into a walkable street with bike lanes and safer automobile traffic. This strategy is especially effective in neighborhoods where overly wide roads have created an unsafe atmosphere for pedestrians, cyclists, and drivers (Photograph and digital rendering: ©2009 Jeremy Murdock).

One notable issue relative to new streets is that it’s possible to inadvertently encourage speeding by making the road corridor extra wide to accommodate dedicated bike lanes. This is a controversial topic in design circles and requires considerable skill and understanding of the community’s transportation needs to resolve. On some streets, it may be better to focus solely on walkability while on other more heavily traveled commuter corridors it may be more useful to emphasize bike travel. Like many smart growth issues, a knowledgeable design professional can be helpful in sorting through the options.

Re-striping of the existing pavement created this bike lane on Main Street in Starkville, Mississippi. Where travel lanes are wide, reallocation of space for bike lanes can encourage more biking and slow car traffic (Photograph: ©2014 Michael Seymour).
To make public transit work in the long run, focus on walkable density now

In major metropolitan areas, public transit functions because of the surrounding density of development because you can ride the bus or train to the office, then walk to lunch or shopping and then ride home. Without pedestrian-oriented, dense development you can end up still needing a car after you’ve arrived at your first destination. While it may seem a long ways off, the path to major public transportation projects is through sound planning and incremental increases in density. Focusing on infill development now will help to make fixed-route public transit viable in the future.

Oxford, Mississippi, is a small college town with a population of approximately 20,000. Despite being a small town, the community has a very successful public transit system. The "Oxford University Transit (OUT)" is a partnership between the city and University of Mississippi and provides transportation options to residents and students in the city and county areas (Photograph: ©2009 Jeremy Murdock).
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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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