PRINCIPLE 9: Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost effective

PRINCIPLE 10: Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration in development decisions
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 9:
Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost effective

A. DISCUSSION

What is the current situation?

Many times the vision and direction for the city are set by the mayor and elected officials. Often that vision and direction impact the physical development of the city through policies, processes, and communication. However, when that vision is set solely by the elected officials without buy-in from the overall community, then that vision shifts with every municipal election. Every new group of elected officials attempts to set its own course, which creates tremendous issues from a development standpoint.

In addition to establishing a consistent long-term vision for the community, the city leadership should establish a clear process for development including a process for gaining approval, required permits, and development standards and codes. Regardless of how many rules or codes are in place, having a clear process and outline for developers will create a consistent and predictable environment for developers.

Another issue related to creating a predictable and fair environment for the entire community is the enforcement of existing city policies and rules. Many leaders believe that waiving policies for certain developers or projects creates a "pro-economic development" environment. However, waiving policies for some developers but not for others creates a highly unpredictable and unfair environment for the community. Treating everyone equally will create a much more successful environment for developers and residents.

Also, when rules and policies are not enforced consistently, the residents suffer because they are not able to predict how the areas around them will develop. This discourages private investment because there is no predictability as to whether or not their investment will be protected over the long-term. For example, if a resident chooses to improve his or her property based on the fact that the surrounding land use is compatible with their improvements, then exceptions are made for the adjacent property to develop in a different manner. This devalues the original investment.

B. STRATEGIES

Establish a consistent vision for the community.

Builders and developers depend on a clear and consistent process as they navigate cities’ approval procedures. If the processes change with every election, then developers cannot accurately predict costs, time frames, and standards for their projects. In order to encourage growth and development, then a clear process should be developed for development approval, permitting, and procedures. Once developed, it should be enforced consistently regardless of city administration.

Follow your own rules.

Treat everyone equally regardless of the project. The city’s policies and procedures were put into place in order to create a fair and predictable environment for all citizens. Do not provide exceptions for certain developers just because of their project. Enforce all rules and guidelines that have been put into place so that local developers, local residents, and outside developers all follow the same rules.
A. DISCUSSION

What is the current situation?

Elected officials are charged with managing and leading the city. On a daily basis, community leaders make decisions on issues ranging from repairing potholes to developing major economic development strategies for the city. In addition, most elected officials are serving their communities on a volunteer basis and have full-time jobs in addition to their civic duties. So with an ever-growing list of items to address and a very limited time frame, officials often do not often have time to organize public input sessions or focus groups or survey the general public for every issue that arises.

In some instances, issues arise that garner more attention in the public’s eye than others. Elected officials can attract a tremendous amount of criticism when the general public feels as though decisions were made without their input. This can create a very difficult situation for the leaders.

Citizens are asked to prioritize the issues that are most important to them during a public input session in Columbus, Mississippi. This allows all stakeholders an opportunity to voice their opinions about issues, which allows leaders to make informed decisions for their community. Oftentimes this process also allows residents to have a more realistic understanding of the number of issues facing the community and how difficult it is to choose the highest priority. (Photograph ©2009 Jeremy Murdock)
Public outcry is commonly seen with issues related to growth, development, and planning. Citizens are often very defensive about decisions that will impact their property or development in general. When making decisions related to planning policies, it is crucial that the public be well informed about the intentions and goals of the policy. Often the public only hears about the “what,” such as the rezoning, new ordinance, or new policy. They are typically unaware of the reasoning behind the change or the “why.”

B. STRATEGIES

*Explain the reasons for the rules*

When establishing a long-term vision related to growth and development within a community, it is imperative that the citizens are involved in the process. Encouraging a collaborative environment between the residents, developers, and elected officials allows for the development of a long-term plan that will be sustainable. When the entire community is involved in establishing the vision, the implementation of that vision can outlast the ever-changing elected leadership.

Elected officials should create opportunities for public discussions about various topics and should value the input of their constituents. Not only should the policy changes be outlined, but more importantly the reasons behind them and why the changes are important to the long-term sustainability of the community should be outlined. When citizens understand the “end state” that is trying to be achieved, they will be more likely to support the initiatives. However, when they feel like the local government is simply trying to impose new rules and laws to stifle growth and development, they will be much more likely to oppose those measures.

The photograph on the top right illustrates the current condition of the major thoroughfare in this community. The current state of the corridor is seen as an eyesore, and most residents see the need to revitalize the area.

The elected officials realize that the existing conditions are a direct result of the current policies that are in place to guide development. Realizing this, the officials plan to completely rewrite the development code for the community in order to achieve a different result with new development in the future. The long-term vision is for this corridor to become more walkable and valuable in the future, so the officials have selected a Form-based Code as the model for the new development code.

In an effort to quell public outcry, the officials host various workshops and informational sessions, as well as launch a comprehensive advertising campaign to inform the residents of the issues. As part of the marketing campaign and educational sessions, they use graphics and images to illustrate the long-term vision and impact of their plans. The officials feel as though residents can understand the Form-based Code better if they can actually see the results of the code.

The bottom photograph is used to illustrate the impact that the Form-based Codes can have on the corridor. Since the Form-based Code values the form of the building and the quality of the public realm rather than simply the use of the building, the result would be much more attractive and financially successful. By showing the general public an example of what the new code can accomplish, the public will be much more likely to support the initiative (Top photograph ©2013 Jeremy Murdock; Bottom photograph ©2012 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.

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.