Neighborhood-Scale Planning Tools to Create Active, Livable Communities

Sprawling urban development and auto-dominated streets make it nearly impossible for people to integrate walking or bicycling into their daily routines. As national physical activity levels decrease and obesity rates increase, local leaders are looking for ways to incorporate smart growth or livable communities principles into their general plans so people can safely and conveniently walk and ride a bicycle for transportation and exercise. They are also using these concepts to reduce congestion, air pollution and automobile dependence.

While many communities subscribe to livable communities principles, they often encounter difficulty implementing them. All too often the broad smart growth objectives in a general plan lack the detail that is needed to guide actual development and are not translated into the zoning code. The result is development that is less compact, and less conducive to walking and bicycling than was originally envisioned.

▲ More than 60% of adults in the U.S. do not achieve the recommended 30 minutes of daily physical activity, according to the Surgeon General's report on "Physical Activity and Health."

What makes for a livable community?

❑ **Mixed-use development** brings housing, commercial, retail, civic and office development into closer proximity placing more destinations within reach of a short walk, bike ride or transit trip.

❑ **Compact development** makes more efficient use of land, preserves open space, lowers infrastructure costs, supports neighborhood retail and transit services, and brings destinations closer together.

❑ **Slow, interconnected traffic-calmed streets** ensure safe, convenient pedestrian and bicycle circulation without impeding vehicle circulation.

❑ **Pedestrian-scale design** balances automobile circulation and focuses on making environments that are comfortable, pleasant and pedestrian-oriented.

❑ **Transit-oriented and transit-adjacent development** places higher intensity development within close proximity to transit stops making transit a more viable alternative to the automobile and increasing ridership for the transit system. Increases in ridership generates revenue to fund higher levels of transit service.

❑ **Mix of housing types** provides housing choices and equitable access to services for people of all income levels and life cycles.

For more livable communities principles

❑ Local Government Commission – The Ahwahnee Principles
www.lgc.org/ahwahnee/principles.html

❑ Smart Growth Network – Smart Growth Principles
www.smartgrowth.org/about/principles/default.asp

Local Government Commission

ActiveLiving LEADERSHIP
Working with government leaders to create and promote active communities

Planning Proactively with Neighborhood-Scale Planning Tools

The Ahwahnee Principles encourage local governments to prepare neighborhood-scale plans that refine general plan policies and plan proactively for new development. All too often, however, these neighborhood-level plans – whether specific plans, precise plans or master plans – are simply glorified versions of the broader comprehensive plans and fail to provide sufficient detail about the overall design of the community – the location and width of streets, sidewalks and parking, the location and massing of buildings, and the relation of buildings to the street and to one another. To implement smart growth concepts, these plans need to establish standards and guidelines to provide elected officials, residents and developers with a clear picture of how future development will look and feel.

The process of producing a neighborhood-scale plan also provides an important opportunity to engage stakeholders in a more detail-oriented planning process. When prepared and administered effectively, neighborhood-scale planning tools can help to:

❏ Create old-style walkable neighborhoods with nearby retail, pedestrian-friendly, shaded streets and a variety of housing types.

❏ Ensure that large greenfield sites are developed in a coherent manner.

❏ Make certain that new development complements and enhances the existing community.

❏ Identify and address contentious planning and design issues at the neighborhood scale.

❏ Plan for future infrastructure financing.

Community design charrettes and workshops can help build consensus. ▶

Case Study

A "master" strategy for smart growth

The City of Turlock requires all newly annexed lands to be subject to specific plans or master plans in an effort to implement smart growth goals and produce plans for "logical, orderly, and quality growth." The City crafts master plans in much the same way they do their specific plans but using a master plan avoids the necessity of conforming to state mandated rules, regulations and annual reports.

➢ For more information: City of Turlock Planning Manager Michael Cooke, (209) 668-5640 or www.ci.turlock.ca.us/citydepartments/communityplanning/index.asp

The process of producing a neighborhood-scale plan provides an important opportunity to engage stakeholders in a more detail-oriented planning process.

▲ Pedestrian-oriented street in Hercules' new Waterfront District.

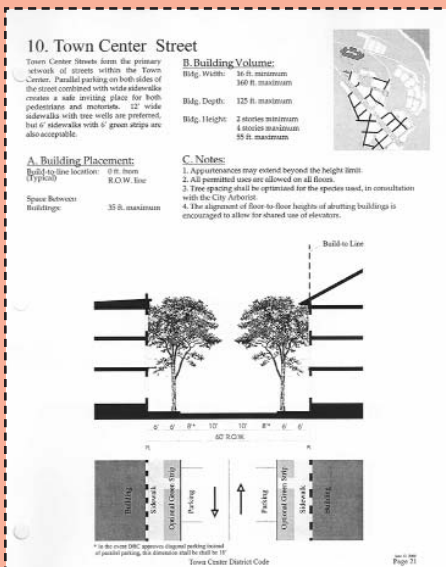These tools are useful for refining and implementing the general plan at the neighborhood scale:

Area and Community Plans

Area and community plans are optional components of the general plan that are used to refine general plan policy and resolve conflicts at the neighborhood scale.

Specific Plans

Unlike area and community plans, specific plans are adopted separately from the general plan and focus heavily on implementation. Specific plans allow local governments to take a proactive approach

▼ Winter Springs, FL: Form-based codes are based on graphics and are more user-friendly.

to planning and implementation. State law requires specific plans to include a land use plan, an infrastructure development and financing plan, and development standards. While these required elements are useful, they can make specific plans costly and time consuming to prepare.

Master Plans

Some communities employ the master plan as a simpler and less expensive alternative to the specific plan. Master plans can be cost effective especially for planning areas that are less contentious.

Planned Unit Developments

Planned Unit Developments are changes in land use zoning which allow for the adoption of a unique set of development standards for a single development. Unlike specific plans, Planned Unit Developments are usually initiated by developers rather than local government.

Form-Based Zoning Codes

In the last few years, a new zoning tool has emerged to help local governments implement their plans and ensure that the physical form of new development is consistent with the community's vision.

Form-based zoning codes clearly establish what is desired in new neighborhoods by specifying the massing, height and location of buildings, as well as their relationship to the street. These codes also pay special attention to the location of parking, the width of streets and the design of public spaces.

Unlike conventional zoning codes that can be lengthy and difficult for the average person to read, form-based codes are based on graphics and are more user-friendly. Form-based codes are highly specific and can be set up to allow developers to build "by right."

Tips for Effective Neighborhood-Scale Planning

Starting Off

❑ Make sure the general plan establishes a clear and representative vision that is based on livable community concepts.

❑ Define a clear intent for developing a neighborhood-scale plan.

❑ Choose the neighborhood-scale planning tool that best suits your community's needs and constraints.

Consensus Building

❑ Identify key stakeholders and hold public workshops and design charrettes to involve the public in establishing a vision for the plan area.

❑ Consider forming a committee with a broad representation of community groups and organizations. Such a committee can help build consensus and minimize conflicts.

❑ Make sure the initial intent of the plan remains clear and focused throughout the planning process.

❑ Secure broad political support for the neighborhood planning process.

Planning – Information Gathering

❑ Assess the current social, environmental, and economic conditions in the area. This can include a wide range of issues including jobs/housing balance, housing affordability, historic buildings, traffic congestion, and the local business climate.

❑ Identify development constraints and opportunities.

❑ Interview property and business owners to understand their needs.

❑ Employ a market study to set realistic targets for the amount of new retail, office, and residential development a given area can support.

❑ Consider how the elements in the plan affect the block, street, building, neighborhood, district and corridor scales simultaneously.

Planning – Suggestions

❑ Require shared parking arrangements to facilitate compact development.

❑ Don't let the plan get watered down. If major opposition arises, perhaps more education, visioning, and consensus building is required. In particular, do not compromise on density, mixing of uses and parking standards.

❑ Try to conduct environmental analysis (CEQA) concurrently with the plan. This helps to avoid surprises down the road and can allow for the mitigation of some environmental impacts through design.

◄ Sacramento's R St. Market includes a grocery store, restaurants, retail shops and loft apartments.

Transit-oriented plan fulfills community vision

The Milpitas, CA Midtown Specific Plan advances a cohesive vision for the future development of this Northern California city. The plan, informed by more than 25 hours of public meetings, interviews and workshops, establishes design standards for future mixed-use and higher density transit-oriented development around light rail and future Bay Area Rapid Transit stations. A network of parks, plazas and bicycle trails are also included to help unify new neighborhoods within the site.

Finally, the plan employs a Program EIR which helps to relieve additional environmental analysis by incorporating mitigation measures into the plan's policies. In this way, the program EIR can help expedite the environmental review process for individual projects and encourage private investment in the area.

➢ For more information: James Lindsay, City of Milpitas, (408) 586-3274 or
www.ci.milpitas.ca.gov/midtown/default.asp

Design

❏ Utilize form-based zoning to provide a clear vision for future development and simplify the process.

❏ When possible, incorporate natural features such as trees, creeks and habitat into the design rather than defaulting to mitigation.

Administration

❏ Change the zoning code to ensure that the new vision is codified. This can be achieved by overhauling the existing code, or by adding a reference requiring compliance to the criteria stated in the specific or master plan.

❏ Create more certainty in the development process. Provide expedited processing for projects that meet predetermined design requirements or allow developers to build "by right" if they follow the form-based zoning code.

❏ Streamline the entitlement process.

❏ If appropriate, use redevelopment powers to acquire land, improve infrastructure, and add amenities to the plan area.

❏ When appropriate employ a Negative Declaration or a Program Level EIR to help streamline the environmental review process for the desired types of development in a given area.

◄ Well-designed compact housing, like these townhouse condos, can enhance existing neighborhoods and provide a mix of housing types.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Active Living By Design
www.activelivingbydesign.org

California Governor's Office of Planning and Research
www.opr.ca.gov

Duany Plater-Zyberk – SmartCode™
www.dpz.com/pdf/ 3000_Smartcode.pdf

Form Based Codes Alliance
www.formbasedcodes.org

Local Government Commission – The Ahwahnee Principles
www.lgc.org/ahwahnee/ principles.html

Smart Growth Network – Smart Growth Principles
http://smartgrowth.org/about/ principles/default.asp

Congress for the New Urbanism and the American Planning Association – *Codifying New Urbanism*
www.planning.org/apastore

▲ Before: Redevelopment area adjacent to downtown Petaluma. [see case study below]
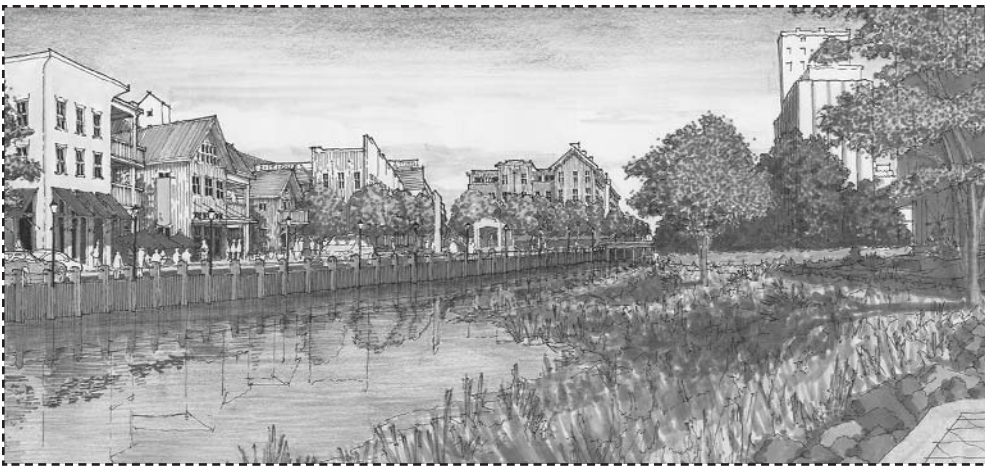
▲ After: Future development as envisioned by Petaluma's form-based zoning code.

Case Study

Form-based development down by the river

The City of Petaluma struggled for seven years to achieve consensus on a specific plan for a 400-acre redevelopment site adjacent to its downtown (see photos above). Despite extensive public outreach, political battles continued between residents, developers and environmentalists. The proposed zoning code was full of legalese and numbers and did not assure the stakeholders that new development would mimic the existing historic downtown. In an effort to move forward, the city hired a consultant who introduced an innovative form-based zoning code called SmartCode™. The new code focused less on separating uses and more on describing the building forms that would realize the community's vision of a pedestrian-oriented, mixed-use district.

Residents have been assured by the clarity and relative simplicity of the new code, and developers appreciate its clear rules and expedited permitting process. After only nine months of community visioning and consensus building, political adversaries agreed on the new form-based zoning code breaking the seven-year logjam. The Central Petaluma Specific Plan was adopted in June 2003, and has given a jump start to the construction of a new, mixed-use theater district.

➢ For more information: City of Petaluma, (707) 778-4345, or http://cityofpetaluma.net/cdd/cpsp.html