

C e n t e r s o f D e v e l o p m e n t

PRINCIPLE

The development patterns reflected in the existing villages, hamlets and the City of Ithaca's downtown area and neighborhoods are key components of the built environment and greatly contribute to the vitality of the local economy and community life.

The Consequences of Sprawl

Traditional historic patterns of development are still very visible and prominent in much of Tompkins County. The pattern of a main street neatly lined with historic buildings sitting amid a grid of neighborhood streets can be seen in the City of Ithaca and its neighborhoods, and in most of the county's villages. Suburban development patterns, which were the dominant development trend of the second half of the twentieth century, can also be found throughout the county.

During the post-World War II era, many communities experienced rapid expansion at the edges of their population centers. Central neighborhoods within cities, town, and villages were emptied of wealth and workers in favor of newer, low density, dispersed developments on their fringes. This pattern of development has had a dramatic effect on the social and economic viability of existing communities, as well as significant impact on the natural environment and quality of community life. The development of formerly open lands has reduced plant and animal habitats, degraded water resources and quality, and influenced transportation choices that have contributed to degraded air quality and increased the threat of global climate change.

This pattern is evident in Tompkins County in the lower density subdivisions built in the suburbs and outlying areas, in the strip commercial development along roadways, and in the residential housing along rural roads throughout the county. Suburban sprawl and low-density, scattered rural development have provided additional housing and living options for residents of the county. However, if this type of land use continues to dominate development practices in the county, the downsides – which are many – will become more pronounced.

Problems associated with low-density development and sprawl include:

- disinvestments in traditional community centers;
- fragmentation and destruction of farmland, forests, wildlife habitats and other open space resources;
- increased traffic from heavy reliance on the automobile;
- degradation of urban neighborhoods;
- higher costs of providing public services; and
- isolation and lack of access to jobs and services.

A 2003 analysis of growth and development trends and population in Upstate New York found that suburban development patterns lead to great imbalances in land use compared to population growth. In the 15 years from 1982 to 1997, the amount of developed land increased by 30 percent. Meanwhile, population grew by just 2.6 percent, reducing the density of the built environment by 21 percent.⁷ Clearly, land is being developed at a far greater rate than the rate of population growth. If we can direct development into existing community centers we can protect the natural resources we cherish, and create and maintain strong communities.

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A Return to the Traditional Neighborhood

A key element in combating this sprawling land use pattern is a return to a pattern of development that resembles more closely the traditional neighborhood and village than the typical late twentieth century suburb. New concepts of urban design make such density compatible with many of the amenities that were sought by those moving to suburban areas, such as more green space, more parks and trails, and increased safety. A denser pattern of development also provides enhanced living options for our aging population including the opportunity to use public transit for health care visits and other services.

Conventional development patterns have helped to create a predominance of strip-mall shopping centers and large suburban tract home developments that are often, with the exception of small cosmetic variations, largely indistinguishable from one another. This does little to stimulate civic pride or contribute to a strong sense of place with which community residents can identify.

Mixed Land Use

Mixing land uses – commercial, residential, recreational, educational, and others – in neighborhoods or places that are accessible by bicycle and on foot can create vibrant and diverse communities. A mix of uses attracts people to shop, meet friends, and live in neighborhoods like Fall Creek in the City of Ithaca or villages like Trumansburg, two areas that have seen rapid appreciation in the value of residential real estate.

Mixed land uses are critical to achieving great places to live, work, and play. When homes are located within short

⁷ Rolf Pendall, *Sprawl Without Growth: The Upstate Paradox*

distances to grocery stores, schools, or key employment centers, residents can take advantage of alternatives to driving, such as walking or biking. A mix of land uses also supports a more varied population and a wider commercial base to support public transit. Mixed land uses can enhance the vitality and security of an area by increasing the number of people using sidewalks and walkways. A mix of land uses also helps to revitalize community life because streets, public spaces, and retail establishments again become places where people meet and talk.

Mixed land uses also bring substantial fiscal and economic benefits. Commercial parcels often have higher property values, and when located near residential areas can help raise local tax revenues. Businesses recognize the benefits of being able to attract customers and clients, as well as skilled workers, from nearby residential centers. Many of the nation's best commercial real estate markets are in cities and suburbs with vibrant, traditional downtowns centers.

Nodal Development

Nodal development – that is, development that is clustered in a population center – is a way to direct growth towards existing communities that are already served by viable infrastructure. Nodal development uses the resources that existing neighborhoods offer, and maintains the value of public and private investment. By encouraging development in existing areas, communities benefit from a stronger tax base, closer proximity of jobs and services, increased efficiency of already developed land and infrastructure, reduced development pressure in fringe areas, and preservation of farmland and open space.

In addition, the process of increasing development in existing communities can maximize the use of existing impervious surfaces, such as existing shared parking lots,

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thereby improving local and regional water quality. Denser development can also create opportunities for more transportation options, which lower vehicle miles traveled and ultimately improve regional air quality. Often existing neighborhoods can accommodate much of the growth that communities require through infill development, brownfields redevelopment, and the rehabilitation of existing buildings.

CENTERS OF DEVELOPMENT

Developing outside of community centers:

- Requires more linear feet of utility lines (water, sewer, electric, phone, etc.)
- Creates an ever-spiraling need for services while areas already served may be stagnating or in decline

Developing in existing community centers:

- Promotes stronger tax base
- Allows closer proximity of jobs, services, and housing
- Increases efficiency of already developed land and infrastructure
- Reduces development pressure in fringe areas
- Allows for preservation of farmland and open space

Infill development consists of building homes, businesses and public facilities on unused and underutilized lands within existing communities. Taking advantage of infill development opportunities keeps resources where people already live, allows rebuilding to occur, and is key to accommodating growth that supports the quality of life for existing residents.

According to the Urban Land Institute, developing new neighborhoods on the outskirts of existing ones eventually costs a community from 40 to 400 percent more than infill development, when the costs of building and maintaining new roads, sewers, fire stations and schools are taken into account. Other costs include the health and psychological toll of air pollution, traffic congestion, and loss of open space. Short-term profits may result from developing outside of population centers, but the long-term costs are passed on to communities in the form of higher taxes, deterioration of local roadways, distress of downtown businesses, and a declining quality of life. Given our car culture, all growth increases traffic to some degree, but infill can alleviate congestion by reducing trips and encouraging alternative transportation.

Policies

A pattern of development that replicates traditional neighborhoods or that builds on the infrastructure and strengths of existing communities will combat sprawl and preserve open land, resources, and public and private funds.

It is the policy of Tompkins County to:

- Strengthen and enhance the City of Ithaca's downtown area as the urban center of the County.
- Strengthen and enhance the villages and hamlets of the County as vital service and community centers.
- Increase the amount and density of housing and business space in the central business districts throughout the County.
- Promote greater density by encouraging development of existing "gaps" left by abandoned buildings and vacant parcels.
- Concentrate appropriate commercial, industrial, and retail development onto relatively small amounts of land, in close proximity to housing and consumers, in existing areas of concentrated development.

Action Items

Action items are activities that Tompkins County government or community partners can undertake to implement policies.

TO DO

Work with municipalities to identify and map areas appropriate for infill development.

TO DO

Develop or identify model development design standards that address how to maintain a distinct edge between the urban/village areas and the rural countryside.

TO DO

Evaluate and modify the following programs for consistency with and furtherance of the nodal development patterns: review of development proposals under GML 239, Economic Development Revolving Loan Fund, Agricultural Districts, and advisory boards' work programs.