

# Interlocking Pieces: Neighborhoods and Communities

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# Strong Communities

## PRINCIPLE

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Tompkins County residents should be safe, healthy, and comfortable with the aesthetics of their communities, and have daily opportunities to interact with neighbors and community members to build strong, cohesive communities.

## Where would you rather walk?



*Safety, aesthetics, social perception, and infrastructure all contribute to how inviting an area is for walking.*

## What Makes a Strong Community?

Strong communities come in many different packages. Some can be found in clusters of houses in rural areas, others in busy urban neighborhoods, and still others in suburban subdivisions. Common characteristics of strong communities are friendly relationships between neighbors, satisfaction with the quality of the built environment, and a feeling that residents can live a safe and healthy life. There is a national trend for skilled workers and employers to move to locations – often smaller cities – that offer a variety of strong communities.

An indicator of a strong community is how frequently people walk in their neighborhoods. The presence of walkers indicates that elements of pedestrian infrastructure,

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their neighborhoods.**

security, convenience, and community destinations are present. Among the benefits for walkers are impromptu interactions with neighbors, which foster a sense of belonging. Walking is also a healthy, stress-relieving, and low-cost means of exercise.

## Benefits of a Walkable Community

Surveys have shown that people who walk for recreation and exercise tend to walk near their homes, and people who live in neighborhoods with walkways that connect to multiple destinations walk three times as often as people who live on streets that do not connect to destinations.

Communities can be built or improved so that walking is a viable alternative. An inviting pedestrian infrastructure can reduce the need for people to drive cars to every destination. Among the many benefits of a walkable community are improved air quality, lower transportation costs, improved personal health and fitness, and expanded consumer housing choice. Another significant benefit is improved access to services for the portion of population that is too old, too young, or too poor to drive.

Walkability is defined as the degree to which people feel comfortable and safe walking to and from destinations. A good general rule of thumb is that people are willing to walk five to ten minutes to run an errand or walk to school, but for anything over that distance, the inclination shifts to driving a vehicle. A five- to ten-minute walk translates roughly into a quarter- to a half-mile in distance.

## The Impact of Automobiles

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With the widespread and affordable ownership of private cars, suburbanization of shopping areas, and the development of schools and other community destinations outside of existing population centers, the simple act of walking has fallen out of favor. Residential development outside of existing population centers, combined with a more sedentary lifestyle has led to fewer people walking or biking to work, school, and other destinations.

Estrangement from this basic, healthy, and enjoyable activity has had many negative consequences, among them poor human health, stress on our roadway infrastructure, degradation of the environment, and erosion of social interaction among neighbors. The overuse of automobiles has affected our well-being in numerous ways:

- **Health:** Americans in general are exercising less and eating more, with resulting dramatic increases in obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and other illnesses. Poor diet and lack of exercise is now second only to cigarette smoking as a leading cause of death in the United States.
- **Highways:** Heavy use of our streets, roads, and highways leads to deteriorating road conditions and the need for repairs that many governments are finding difficult to afford.
- **Environment:** According to the Environmental Protection Agency, 51 percent of the carbon monoxide in typical U.S. cities comes from vehicles, with vehicle emissions contributing significant amounts of the air pollutants that affect human health and the environment.
- **Social connections:** Dependence on the automobile for even the shortest household trips limits social interaction among neighbors, adding to the increasing trend of social isolation.

## The Wish to Walk

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The 2000 U.S. Census showed that many Tompkins County residents are walkers, much more so than other Upstate residents. In 2000, an average of 4 percent of all people walked to work in New York State (omitting New York City). In Tompkins County, 17 percent walked to work, and 1 percent rode a bicycle. In the City of Ithaca, the percentage of walkers was 41 percent. Many of the walkers are students, but even with students removed from the calculation, the countywide average for walking is 7 percent.

Another item gleaned from the 2000 Census is that the number of walking commuters in New York State declined by

24 percent from 1990 to 2000. In Tompkins County, the number of walkers declined by just 2 percent. It appears that we are a community that relies on and values walking.

## The Price of Suburbanization

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Traffic impacts on neighborhoods, deterioration of community infrastructure, disinvestments in existing neighborhoods, and rural and suburban isolation are problems that are increasingly impacting Tompkins County communities. Pedestrian-scale development and enhanced walkability, on the other hand, can contribute to more vital and sustainable places to live and work.

While traditional rural communities were linked together by the bonds of an agrarian economy tied to the land and grassroots cooperative problem solving, such commonality of interests and interaction is often lacking in today's suburban and rural residential areas.

Low density sprawling development creates living environments that provide few opportunities for interaction with neighbors and often lack such amenities as sidewalks and neighborhood parks that contribute to a healthy lifestyle. Health officials have made the link between built environments that encourage walking and active, healthier lifestyles. This recognition is prompted by increasing rates of obesity-related illnesses and the skyrocketing costs incurred by society to pay for medical treatment of those illnesses.

Planning trends nationwide are reacting to the proliferation of suburbs through movements such as New Urbanism, Neotraditional Planning, and Healthy Communities. In New York State an outgrowth of these movements is the Quality Communities Initiative. What these movements have in common is an attempt to create communities that derive strength and vitality from the greater interaction among neighbors and the health benefits that result from well-developed pedestrian networks and nearby availability of employment, shopping, community facilities, and other services.

## A Return to Aesthetics and Community Identity

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Conventional late twentieth century development patterns have helped to create a predominance of strip shopping centers and large suburban tract home developments that are, with the exception of small cosmetic variations, largely indistinguishable from one another. While such an approach may conserve costs initially and make development more profitable for some, it does little to stimulate civic pride or contribute to a strong sense of place with which community

residents can identify. Also, since low-density suburban and strip mall developments are rarely located within ten-minute walks of destinations and are rarely designed to be easily and invitingly accessible to pedestrians, these types of development patterns result in fewer pedestrian trips and increases in traffic and congestion.

While developers need to respond to basic commercial or housing needs, developments can and should also help create communities that are distinctive and unique. Fostering the

**Development should not only respond to basic commercial or housing needs, but should also help create communities that are distinctive and unique.**





types of physical environments that create a sense of civic pride also support a more cohesive community fabric. As a result, economic benefits accrue as well; high-quality communities with architectural and natural elements that reflect the interests of all residents are more likely to retain their economic vitality and value over time.

Communities that have a strong sense of place represent the values of their residents and reflect the unique historical, cultural, economic, and geographical context of the area. They use natural and man-made boundaries and landmarks to create a sense of defined neighborhoods, urban communities and rural hamlets. These communities encourage the construction and preservation of buildings that contribute to the look and feel of a community. Beyond the construction of buildings, these communities reflect their unique characteristics in myriad details – such as landscaping, signs, and awnings – that help to further distinguish the area for passers-by and visitors.

Guided by their own vision of how and where to grow, communities that have adopted these techniques can direct investment and development into areas that already reflect a strong sense of place. Moreover, these communities can encourage new development to make a better effort to create distinctive, unique civic assets.

## Action Items

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

-  **TO DO** Advance implementation of a county-wide multiuse trail network.
-  **TO DO** Conduct pedestrian level-of-service and walkability studies in interested neighborhoods, villages, and hamlets throughout the County.
-  **TO DO** Identify population centers and community facilities that are underserved by the existing transit system.
-  **TO DO** Provide pedestrian connections between the waterfront and downtown residential neighborhoods through urban creek corridors.

## Policies

It is the policy of Tompkins County to:

- Facilitate the creation and maintenance of a safe, appealing, and efficient multi-purpose network for walking and enhance the pedestrian environment through appropriate design.
- Locate county facilities and encourage other community facilities to be located within population centers, particularly those facilities that provide opportunities for social interaction, group activities, community events, and meeting spaces.
- Encourage the development of diverse communities that provide a mix of uses, a variety of employment options, social and recreational opportunities, and an assortment of amenities within walking distance of residential development.
- Enhance the quality of communities by improving the character of the built environment, including visually appealing architectural elements and streetscapes that encourage pedestrian travel, facilitate community interaction, and promote public safety.
- Preserve and enhance the distinct identities and historic character of existing neighborhoods and structures, and encourage the development of new neighborhoods that possess their own special sense of place, through attractive design of public places; proximity to schools, parks and other services; and community festivals and events.
- Improve transportation options for people who need access to employment, shopping, and health services.

## Centers of Development

### PRINCIPLE

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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.<sup>7</sup> 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.

Land is being developed at a far greater rate than the rate of population growth.

## 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

<sup>7</sup> 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,

Short-term profits may result from developing outside of population centers, but the long-term costs are passed on to communities.

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.*



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



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



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.

# E f f i c i e n t U s e o f P u b l i c F u n d s

## **PRINCIPLE**

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The effectiveness of taxpayer dollars should be maximized by investing government funds in public infrastructure and facilities in the most efficient manner possible.

### Cost of Infrastructure

Investments in public infrastructure and facilities represent a significant portion of local taxpayer dollars. At the county level, capital construction and facility and infrastructure maintenance, including debt service, requires nearly \$12 million annually. Total transportation expenditures by all levels of government in Tompkins County total over \$35 million a year.

The cost and distribution of many public services can be directly linked to growth and development decisions. Development patterns that result in increased costs for public infrastructure may reduce funds available for public services such as education and health care.

### Responsible Public Spending

Decisions about investments in public facilities and infrastructure can complement other community goals – or be in conflict with them. Compact, higher density development patterns can reduce the cost to taxpayers of additional miles of road, feet of water and sewer lines, miles of transit travel, and number of public facilities.

A public spending ethic that recognizes that it is generally more cost-effective to utilize existing infrastructure, and to add to the capacity of existing systems before building new ones, can support and reinforce the quality of life in existing communities while lightening the burden on taxpayers. Particularly in these days of constrained resources at all levels of government, we must recognize that land use

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Every new foot of road, sewer line, and water line is not only a current capital cost but is an ongoing maintenance expense and will one day need to be replaced. Unlike many expenditures for current services, capital investments represent a long term commitment of public resources. Dispersed development can also result in ongoing increased public service costs for public or special transportation to allow residents to gain access to needed medical and other services; busing of school children; public safety patrols; emergency

response capability; and provision of other community services at more sites for a given population than would otherwise be necessary.

### Quality of Community Life

High public costs can discourage private investment and result in a downward spiraling cycle of community decline. On the other hand compact development may allow taxpayers to purchase a higher level of public services for the same tax dollar. Communities that can maintain higher levels of public facilities and services in a cost effective manner are more attractive locations for private investment. Private investment in compact development, in turn, provides the tax base to support desired services and results in successful, sustainable communities.

## Policies

It is the policy of Tompkins County to:

- Maintain County facilities to protect the public’s investment, to effectively serve residents, and to provide an efficient working environment for employees now and in the future.
- Optimize the value of community investments in water treatment and distribution facilities and in sewer collection and treatment facilities by encouraging higher density in areas served by these facilities.
- Save public costs by encouraging new development to locate in places contiguous to existing development where sewer, water, roads and other infrastructure already exist, or are planned as part of a comprehensive plan to accommodate projected growth.
- Consider intermunicipal alternatives when addressing issues related to water supply and wastewater disposal.

## Action Items

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

**TO DO** → Develop or identify model land development regulations and design standards that support denser development in areas with water and sewer services (including infill and mixed-use) and limited development in areas without such services.

**TO DO** → Review highway jurisdictional patterns in Tompkins County.

**TO DO** → Facilitate intermunicipal cooperation in sharing equipment, purchasing materials, and storing materials.

**TO DO** → Evaluate a downtown office plan for future County facility needs.

**TO DO** → Determine the location of future County Health Department facility and the future use of Biggs B building

**TO DO** → Implement the countywide Public Safety Communications System project.

**TO DO** → Renovate and expand the County Public Safety building to meet projected needs.

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