

Cleanliness
Appealing banners
Eye-catching signs
Street furniture
Farmers' markets
Trails
Community gardens
Rain gardens
No boarded-up windows
No blank walls
Curbside or rear parking
Pocket parks
Paint
Attractive street lights
Nice views
Outdoor dining
Flowers
Tot lots
Live/work spaces
Age-friendly
Bicycle-friendly
Bike rides
Landscaping
Decorative fencing
Fabric awnings
Murals
Mural competitions
Fairs
Parades
Sidewalk sales
Street clean-ups
Public art
Art studios and galleries
Local history
High visibility crosswalks
Traffic calming
— and more...
... as far as
our imaginations
carry us



Community Planning: small changes that make a BIG difference



Small Steps Forward

The Genesee Transportation Council is a transportation planning organization. Over the past 10 years we have funded nearly 100 plans and studies in communities large and small throughout our nine-county region. Many of these plans address both transportation and land use. They have helped individual communities preserve their unique sense-of-place by balancing considerations for motor vehicles, pedestrians, and bicycles. And they have helped many communities work together to safely enhance the aesthetic, historic, economic, and environmental qualities of a major transportation corridor they all share.

The planning process usually begins with brainstorming or visioning, as residents' ideas are recorded in surveys, flip charts, and reports. It is creative and democratic. It taps into the knowledge of the people who know a community best. It energizes participants. And it's fun. A shared vision is then turned into a plan for the future, a strategy to guide a community's actions and investments.

We believe that thoughtful, inclusive, visionary, comprehensive planning is the best way for communities to prepare for the future. But we also realize it's not the only way. Often, the time is not right for a community to embark on a major planning process — maybe money for land use or transportation planning can't be approved or key stakeholders are not on board, maybe confidence is low and skepticism is high. In such cases, there are many relatively-modest but highly-effective concrete actions that elected officials, citizens, and others can take to revitalize their community and, in so doing, gradually but effectively establish a shared vision for the future.

That's what this publication is about. We suggest small things that can add up to a big difference in a community's appearance, vitality, and prospects. It's not a substitute for comprehensive planning, but a series of small but visible steps a community can take on the path to bigger projects and bigger plans.

Trees, flowers, small parks, attractive open spaces, even a sidewalk bench — these things are contagious. When people experience them, they want more of them. And they're willing to pay for them because they know they're getting something for their money.

Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley



All of the streets, neighborhoods, and communities we admire are unique, but share common attributes. They are all...



... Clean

They — government and property owners — attend to the little maintenance issues, such as picking up litter, repairing sidewalks, nurturing street trees, emptying trash cans, cleaning facades, and placing and maintaining benches and flowers on main streets.

... Comfortable

They make a community easier to get around and facilitate spontaneous personal contact with benches, bike paths, helpful signage, etc. Paying attention to the little “comforts” also shows developers that the community cares about its future and gives them an extra incentive to invest.

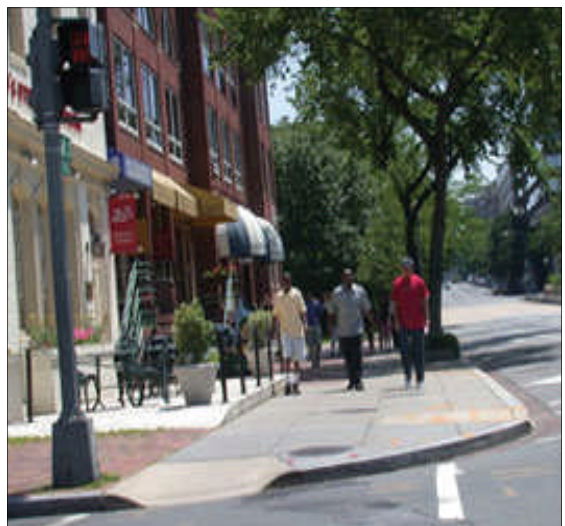


... Neighborly

Streets are welcoming and safe for all users — pedestrians, motorists, bicyclists, young and old. Their cleanliness, comfort, and appeal create a “neighborliness”, a feeling of community that encourages people to use them more, which, in turn, increases the streets’ vibrancy and health.

... Interesting

Landscaping, street furniture, signs, public art, and other small but important decorative elements reflect the community’s unique personality and history, its quirkiness and charm, its sense of place.



Leadership for Change

Nothing happens without someone taking the lead — mayor, citizen activist, business person, school teacher, property owner, or whoever — and bringing others around to their way of thinking.

How do effective leaders do this?

Osmosis. They're attuned to their surroundings. They absorb information from everyone. Mostly, they pick up their ideas from conversations that are already fermenting in the community.

Small talk. They start with small conversations. Ideas that end up being the most successful are usually shared, refined, and sold at small gatherings in which leaders and potential stakeholders and supporters exchange views.

Human scale. Ideas can be visionary, yet still small enough for people to get their arms around them. Most successful ideas are marketed on a human scale. They provide opportunities for all stakeholders to contribute and, by contributing, see how they could improve their lives and livelihoods.

Feel the vibes. Ideas succeed because they "feel right" to people — they give off the right "vibes" — and that's generally because they build on an existing community asset. The asset may be physical, historical, or cultural and may not be readily apparent to everyone. But once the leader points the asset out, the idea to build upon it becomes obvious and seems natural and necessary.

How to. "What to do" is only the first part of an idea. The second part is "how to do it". Before going too public with your idea, identify the four or five most likely obstacles to implementing it and work hard to get support from other leaders, including municipal officials, business persons, property owners, community organizations, potential volunteers, and others. They may not be willing to go public with their support, at least not at the beginning, but should agree not to stand in the way.

Money. Most ideas to improve a community are met with skepticism about paying for them. Money should be the first obstacle to implementation on your list. (Keep in mind grants, donations, sweat equity, incentives, college interns, volunteers, fund raisers, loans, etc.)

Count to three (then four, then five...). Most leaders are remembered for two or three accomplishments. Identify the two or three things that will be your initial successes and devote your energies to them. And don't give up. Remember that adding 1+1+1+... will get you to a very impressive number before too long. Small accomplishments accumulate to big successes.

- Adapted from Civic Strategies, *From Vision to Reality: How City Administrations Succeed in the Long Haul*, 2003

The number of tools in a community's toolbox and how we use them are limited only by our imaginations. A few examples:

Paint

Painted by residents and community groups:

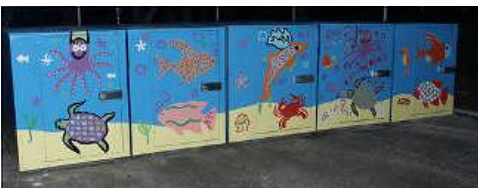
Street Light Posts



Utility Boxes



Bike Lockers



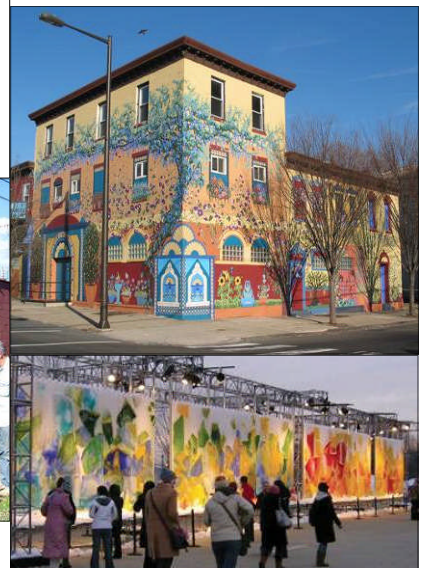
Bike Lane Markings (Careful of your spelling!)



Paint is relatively cheap to apply to most **facades**. Colors that are applied carefully, match, and are appropriate for your local climate and culture can raise spirits, dislodge any fatalism, build ambition, and restore community character.



Murals can tell a story, add personality to a street, bring people together, and, like the free-standing mural at bottom right, shield a vacant lot.



Age-Friendly

High visibility crosswalks are safe and reassuring for all users of all ages



Signs

Public and private signage should be clear, instantly legible, limited in size and number, tasteful, and memorable



Bicycle-Friendly

Bicycling provides transportation, health, recreational, environmental, and economic benefits. Cycling increases in communities where facilities are in place.



Parking

Parking parallel or diagonal to the curb is convenient for motorists and separates pedestrians on the sidewalk from street traffic. Safety and aesthetics are best served when off-street parking lots are located at the rear or sides of buildings and screened with landscaping or fencing.

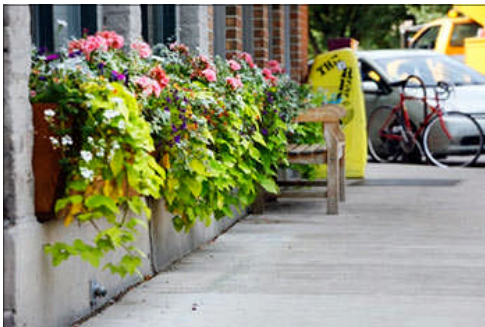


Flowers, Plants, Trees

Landscaping is one of the most cost-effective ways of changing the perception of an area from one that is bland or even downtrodden to one that is beautiful and friendly. Flowers, plants, and trees can increase civic pride, property values, and retail sales. People are much more likely to visit, work, shop, and linger in an area with aesthetically-pleasing landscaping. "Green" signals both community quality and environmental stewardship.



Flowers add appeal to even the most obscure locations



Window planters installed by shop owner



Plants provide pleasing visual experiences. Trees are surrounded by rain garden planters which are cheaper than tree grates.



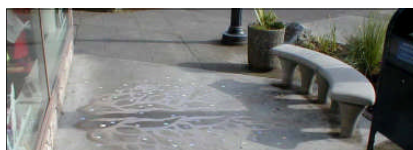
Rain garden with native plants installed by high school students

Street Furniture

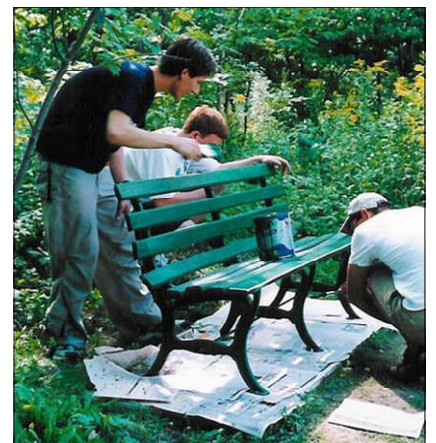
Attractive street lights, benches, and furniture provide comfort and order. They can soften the rough edges of a street, calm your nerves, and make you feel a little more in control of your environment.



Street furniture and design elements feel most comfortable when they are coordinated, consistent, and unifying



Above: Retailer's "window shopping" bench



Above: Bench installed by Boy Scouts

Left: Benches built by high school vocational ed class

More tools and tips to turn streets into centers of activity

ALLEYS

don't have to be dark and dirty



Outdoor dining

allowing front decks for dining projects a relaxed, comfortable, outdoor-enjoyment environment



FABRIC Awnings

add a touch of elegance and shelter from weather



Trails can be inexpensive to build and maintain compared to parks, yet provide many of the same benefits >

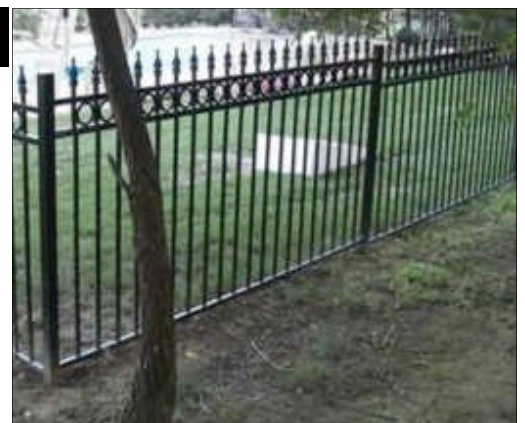
Banners and Flags

promote the community or connect it to its heritage while adding a splash of color



FENCING

replacing a chain link fence with decorative fencing (and cutting the weeds) yields immediate aesthetic improvements



Gateways

mark the beginning and end of a community. They don't have to be elegant, but should send a message that this is a place worth visiting.



Public Gatherings

Fairs, festivals, parades, clean-ups, sidewalk sales, farmers markets, bike rides, mural competitions, and so on are not too difficult to staff or organize, don't require much funding, bring people together, and get people used to coming to a place.



Mixed Use > > >

Allowing residences or art studios above street-level commercial uses can help building owners fill their buildings, creating customers for businesses, convenience for residents, and activity on the streets.

Great Views



Great views are irreplaceable. They capture what a place is all about and should be preserved.



A few words on regulations...

In smaller communities, there is often a sense that zoning regulations are redundant or even unnecessary. Everyone pretty much knows everybody else. If you want your house or store remodeled, you know who the best contractor is, and if it doesn't turn out like you expected, he or she will make it right. Besides, it's my property and I can do what I want with it.

While this attitude toward rules and regulations is an admirable expression of self-reliance, of a community where people look out for one another, and of mutual trust, it doesn't always lend itself to revitalizing a Main Street or neighborhood. Developers and investors, in particular, like the predictability of zoning. They need to know that if their proposals follow the rules they will get official approvals to move forward and that the property next door must abide by the same rules. Appropriate zoning can also help attract the help of local colleges who often need a standard by which to measure progress, as well as attract grant funding.

Zoning today is much more flexible than in the past. It doesn't have to be an either/or situation for applicants. There is wide latitude for individual expression.

Nor does adopting zoning regulations have to be an onerous or expensive process. There are many excellent model zoning ordinances online. They are easy to read, easy to understand, and easy to implement. Zoning ordinances don't have to be written by a consultant or attorney (though they should be reviewed by a municipal attorney).

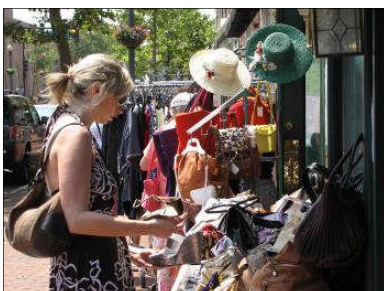
A strong sense that a community can take care of itself is actually a good basis for revitalization. Appropriate zoning can further the process by keeping everyone on the same page.

Supporting Local Retail

Few things make a Main Street or neighborhood more vibrant than retail activity. Small-scale retail, however, is a struggle in many communities, even in the best economic times.

There are several actions a municipal government or chamber of commerce can take to support local retailers, such as partnering with local colleges. The SUNY Geneseo Small Business Development Center, for example, offers small businesses assistance with strategic planning. Municipalities and Chambers can help retailers coordinate promotions such as sidewalk sales and holiday open houses. Most important, local governments and businesses can work together to make their Main Street the center of cultural and civic life by keeping it clean, comfortable, neighborly, and interesting. When people come for a special event or just to walk, they will inevitably patronize local businesses — more people means more business.

The final page of this document lists helpful resources for strategic retail and small business improvement.



Playfulness

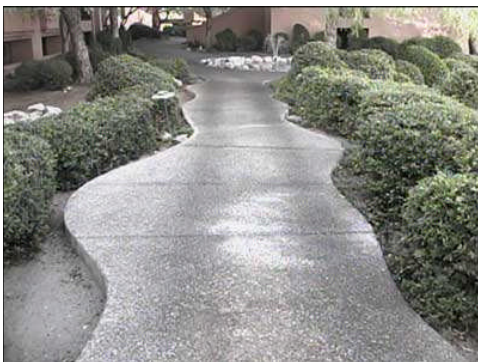
While people generally prefer the orderly and predictable, they also like to be surprised once in a while, especially by things that are clever, playful, and a bit quirky. Familiar objects that have nontraditional colors or shapes or are used in unexpected places, as well as fanciful objects, give a street a personality and bring people back.



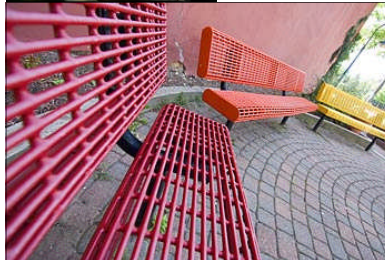
Public Chess Board



Whimsical Public Art



Silly Curved Sidewalk



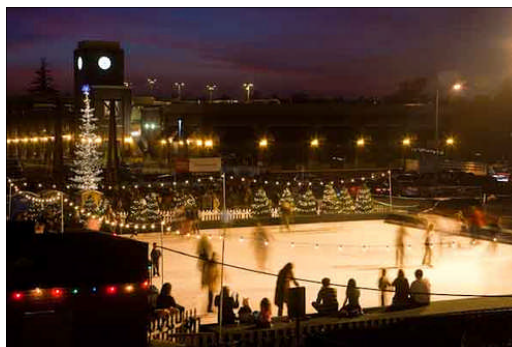
Vibrant Colors



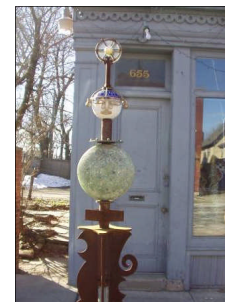
Unusual Bike Rack



Dance Steps in Pavement



Temporary downtown ice skating rink during holiday shopping season



Decorated Parking Meter

Selected Resources

Focused on revitalization and promotion:

The National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street Center has free information and case studies on hundreds of ideas that have been successfully implemented on Main Streets across the country (www.preservationnation.org/main-street).

The Downtown Research and Development Center provides detailed information (and free e-mail newsletters) on programs and promotions that communities are using to attract people to their downtowns (www.downtowndevelopment.com/downtown_research_and_development_center.php).

The University of North Carolina School of Government's "Small Towns, Big Ideas: Case Studies in Small Town Community Economic Development" clearly explains how a wide variety of small communities are confronting the challenges they face (www.sog.unc.edu/programs/cednc/stbi).

The Genesee/Finger Lakes Regional Planning Council's "Preparing Village 'Main Streets' for Planning" is a comprehensive guidebook for the planning of main streets and commercial districts (www.gflrpc.org/Publications/PVMSFP/Guidebook/Index.htm).

The Genesee Transportation Council's "Linking Transportation and Land Use to Create Thriving Communities", an online resource, provides regional examples of communities improving their sense of place, quality of life, and economic vitality with thoughtful planning and development (www.gtcmppo.org/LinkingTransportation.htm).

Focused on small business improvement:

The SUNY Geneseo Small Business Development Center offers free and confidential advice to help re-position or improve a small business (www.geneseo.edu/small_business).

SCORE, a national nonprofit association, offers free and confidential planning and advice for small businesses, including online training, consultation, and workshops (www.score.org).

The U.S. Small Business Association (SBA) offers free online courses and counseling for small business owners and those considering starting a small business (www.sba.gov).

Data:

The University of Wisconsin's Employment and Training Institute provides free comparison data on purchasing power, business activity, and workforce density for all zip codes and census tracts in the United States (www.uwm.edu/Dept/ETI/PurchasingPower/purchasing.htm).

About GTC

The Genesee Transportation Council (GTC) guides transportation planning in the Genesee-Finger Lakes region, which includes Genesee, Livingston, Monroe, Ontario, Orleans, Seneca, Wayne, Wyoming, and Yates Counties.

By federal law, every urbanized area of the country with over 50,000 people must have a formal planning organization for transportation. The Genesee Transportation Council fills that role in our region. GTC is authorized to conduct transportation planning and oversee transportation investment.

Contact GTC

If you have any questions about this document or require information on transportation in our region, please contact the Genesee Transportation Council:

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