Designing Great Places

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Many communities in our region are attempting to enhance their prosperity and quality of life by offering more options for transportation and housing. Planning for a wider range of housing types, streets that are safe for pedestrians and bicyclists, convenient access to parks and recreation, and business development, often prompts discussion about community character. Such discussions are opportunities to think about designing great places.

GTC has funded many community planning studies throughout the region. A common lesson has been learned: to create great places, communities must combine appropriate building standards with good design. Good building and site design enhance any community's character. It can provide places to walk, places to chat with neighbors, and places where children can walk or bike to school safely.

Design Regulations

Design is used to promote compatible architecture and adherence to good planning principles in downtowns, village centers, hamlets, established neighborhoods, and scenic landscapes. Regardless of the context or purpose of a zoning district, design regulations, whether mandatory or voluntary, generally contain the following two elements:

Clear design standards, often supported by design guidelines, that illustrate and explain the concepts that the design standards are meant to achieve.

A review process, often involving municipal staff, the planning board, or a citizen advisory committee, to review development applications and interpret the standards.

The Village of Fairport's Design Overlay District zoning guides development in areas where traditional form is essential to the character of the community

Commercial Corridors

Community design tends to focus on neighborhoods where people live or streets where they walk. Major thoroughfares are often overlooked.

Our major arterials are often our major commercial and shopping corridors. We might like them to have more social interaction, but traffic flow can't be ignored.

That said, certain undivided four-lane highways can often be successfully converted to three lanes, including a center two-way turning lane — freeing up space for new on-street parking, wider sidewalks, curb

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extensions, landscaping, improved bus stops, or bicycle lanes.

In addition to the various road enhancements for safety and access management, the solution may be to include site and building design, such as subdividing large shopping centers to create a block pattern of infill development with pedestrian walkways between the buildings; making sure buildings are set close to the sidewalk; and designing front facades with lots of windows for passersby.

The street-level experience can also be enhanced by gateway treatments, bicycle racks and parking, decorative street lights, retaining walls, tasteful signage, street trees, and other context sensitive design elements that improve transportation as well as aesthetics.

Resources

GTC's Circulation, Accessibility, and Parking Studies and Corridor Studies suggest how design can be used to enhance a community's overall appearance and value (www.gtcmpo.org/LinkingTransportation.htm)

The American Planning Association's Great Places in America website summarizes the design elements that characterize great communities (www.planning.org/greatplaces)

Before

After, with added outbuildings with zero setbacks and pedestrian-oriented design, overall reduced and less-conspicuous parking, pedestrian walkways, improved traffic circulation, and increased landscaping

Subdividing large plazas increases transportation and design options

- Genesee Transportation Council, October 2012

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