

Sustainable Growth *for Small Cities*



*A Tool Kit
for Local Government*

Creating Quality Places - Successful Small Cities

Technical Tool Kit

The Kansas City metropolitan area continues to grow, and despite intentions to promote contiguous, compact growth within the region, many of the smaller, fringe communities surrounding Kansas City are beginning to see the same sprawling development patterns that Kansas City experienced over the last 25 years. At the same time, many smaller communities may be in a better position to change development patterns and fend off undesirable environmental, economic, and social costs that such low density growth produces.

The Successful Small Cities initiative, an extension of the Mid-America Regional Council Creating Quality Places project, brought citizens of three small, metropolitan area communities together to define desirable community development practices applicable to the opportunities and issues faced by smaller jurisdictions. The goals of the program are to: provide an opportunity to involve and inform local residents and community leaders, to build public advocacy for alternatives to conventional development in small cities, and recommend implementation tools that could result in real changes in the way small communities embrace and respond to development pressures.

With funding support from the US EPA, the Mid-America Regional Council sought applications from communities to receive technical assistance covering four aspects of development: environment, land use, transportation, and housing with an emphasis on the physical environment. The assistance was delivered through public workshops hosted by the small city. MARC selected the cities of Harrisonville and Weston, Missouri, and Spring Hill Kansas.

Each of the three cities articulated a specific challenge they faced. For Harrisonville, the issues of traffic safety, conflicts between pedestrians and motor vehicles, and traffic congestion were identified as serious problems. Harrisonville wanted technical assistance in transportation planning and access management. Spring Hill is experiencing development pressures resulting from the construction of a new golf course. Interest in development surrounding the course has increased pressure to extend municipal infrastructure and services. Weston chose to focus on promoting affordable housing and on retaining neighborhoods with a variety of housing styles, types and price ranges.

This Technical Tool Kit is a follow-up to the workshops and provides resources on successful development practices for broader application in small cities throughout the MARC service area. The manual presents city staff and public officials with broad principles upon which to base comprehensive plans and land development regulations, benchmarks against which to judge development proposals, resource lists of ordinances developed in small communities across the country and a catalogue of funding sources for planning initiatives.



Communities that are special places don't happen by accident. It takes active involvement from citizens, city leaders and staff in planning for the future. It also requires taking a broader view of planning objectives. In the recent past, the planning model used in most communities concentrated almost exclusively on economic considerations. This approach resulted in communities out of balance with the natural environment, areas developed with little concern for the impact of storm water runoff and the loss of many community characteristics that residents valued most. More and more cities are looking for a more balanced approach, one that recognizes economic, ecological and cultural values on an equal footing.

The following checklist will help you evaluate if your community is taking a balanced view and plan for growth in a more environmentally friendly way.

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Comprehensive Planning Checklists

Conservation Considerations

- Review your existing plan to see that preservation of natural resources is the framework around which development decisions are made. Community development should complement the natural characteristics of the area and respect natural features.
- Inventory what you value most about your community, and ensure that the plan provides for preserving highest priority areas. Provide public access to these areas wherever possible.
- Inventory and map your ecological resources and describe their current condition. This helps prioritize preservation efforts, focusing effort on those most significant resources in the best condition.
- Identify all environmentally sensitive lands in your community including steep slopes, wetlands, woodlands, native grasslands, wildlife habitats, creeks and bluffs. These are areas where development would create costly impacts to natural systems, drainage patterns and the natural resource context of your community.
- Identify stream corridors for preservation and prioritize their protection. This should include first and second order streams (the smallest, sometimes perennial) as well as the large third order and higher streams. Most damage to downstream segments is due to a lack of protection in the upper reaches of each watershed.
- Consider protection measures such as mandatory stream set backs to protect stream corridors. The minimum width of the corridor should be 100 feet and the total width protected should vary to include high quality upland forests, steeply sloping areas, wetlands, and floodplain wherever possible.
- Protect natural drainage ways from development. Encroaching development on unstable slopes and soils results in widespread erosion and loss of wildlife habitat.

Development Pattern

- Development should only occur on land most suitable for development, avoiding steep slopes, poor soils, floodplains, and wetlands.
- Identify community activity centers. These should be areas of higher intensity development including a variety of mixed uses. Your existing downtown will more than likely be your primary center. Study your existing downtown and emulate the pattern in other, smaller centers. Plan commercial areas that don't compete with your downtown. Additional centers can be different types of neighborhood focal points such as commercial centers, school sites, small parks, churches and other civic uses. Community centers should occur in those areas least sensitive to development impacts.
- Identify your community edges. These form boundaries between kinds of districts, usually differing in activity intensity. They may be natural or manmade and serve as strong organizing elements of community design. In historic terms, edges were usually land designated to agricultural purposes. Today, these may be conservation areas, very low-density residential use in addition to agricultural areas. Preserving edges strengthens the distinction of your community from surrounding areas.
- Plan for an interconnected system of neighborhoods rather than a collection of subdivisions. The ideal neighborhood size is one-quarter mile radius from center to edge.

- ❑ In environmentally sensitive areas, consider planning for cluster development. This is where development is concentrated or “clustered” on the least environmentally sensitive portions of a site and the remainder is left in open space. The open space designation may be as high as 50 percent of the site depending on specific site characteristics.
- ❑ Avoid identifying land use patterns that segregate one socioeconomic group from another and all housing from commercial areas. It is possible and desirable to provide a variety of housing types, office and commercial uses in close proximity to one another served by an interconnected street system.
- ❑ Provide for diversity in parks and open space in both size and activity type. Trail systems and identifiable streetscapes should connect parks. Consider employing a parkway network to interconnect major recreation areas where the roads actually become an integral part of the park system. The city of Kansas City, Missouri’s boulevard system is an excellent example. It is ideal to have green space within a five minute walk of all residents in a neighborhood. Parkland should front on public streets to the extent possible.

The Process

- ❑ Instead of making planning decisions on a case-by-case basis, local governments should decide where they want new growth, infill or redevelopment to occur and use the comprehensive plan process to guide development decisions.
- ❑ Prior to approval of any development, a specific site plan should be prepared consistent with the community’s comprehensive plan.
- ❑ Comprehensive plans should be developed through an open process. Education on alternative development models is an important component and discussions with the public need to include pictures.
- ❑ Communities and developers should consider holding a public workshop, often called a charrette, to get community involvement in a project’s design and to build understanding and support for the proposal.



Neighborhoods are the building blocks of communities. Successful neighborhoods provide a wide range of housing types, styles and price ranges. Many neighborhoods in small cities are interspersed with office and retail development, providing work opportunities and goods and services close to home.

Small communities can often best understand successful neighborhoods when they carefully consider their existing development pattern, especially around the original downtown. Often these areas offer a variety of housing choices that appeal to all ages and income levels; common open spaces that create a community identity; and interconnected, walkable streets.

The following checklist will help you evaluate development proposals relative to creating quality neighborhoods.

Successful neighborhoods provide a wide range of housing types, styles and price ranges.

Neighborhood Design Checklist

- Is the neighborhood linked to surrounding areas, and when possible, does it share commercial spaces and open space resources?
- Does the neighborhood offer a choice of well-designed and maintained housing types and sizes or is everything about the same? Variety of housing choices within a neighborhood meets the needs of residents of different family types and sizes, economic levels and age groups.
- Check to see if there are historic or environmental resources and if these are proposed to be preserved. Rich and diverse neighborhoods result from actions to preserve, restore and reuse historic sites or structures; to conserve and restore environmental resources; and to foster appropriate infill development.
- Does the neighborhood have a distinct identity that helps define its boundaries? Boundaries help foster pride and belonging among residents. The distinct features of a neighborhood include public spaces such as a square, a green or an important street intersection, and public buildings such as a school, post office, library, or community activity center.
- Review the street design to determine that streets are pedestrian friendly. An interconnected network with attractive landscaping encourages walking and uses the street system as a community asset. Do houses front on rather than back up to major streets? When houses front on major streets the corridor becomes more of a community asset.
- Are there a variety of public green spaces within walking distance of residents? Green spaces range from small playgrounds to school-yards to linear trails that connect neighborhoods to one another and other community open spaces.



Public streets and rights-of-way cover as much as one-third of the land area in many communities. Street networks are the threads that weave a community together and give it physical form. Their design is more than an engineering problem.

Circulation design is the most visible element that communicates individuality and establishes community character. While streets have characteristically been designed to carry traffic efficiently and quickly, very little attention is given to fitting the design of the street specifically to a wide variety of community conditions.

The conventional street hierarchy and functional classification system optimizes motor vehicle functions and imposes a single street or right-of-way design template regardless of specific needs.

Unfortunately, this is often at the expense of other modes of transportation, community form, and environmental considerations. Recent transportation planning initiatives suggest that more

varied street design framework can have a beneficial impact on community form while still accomplishing the goal of smooth motor vehicle operations. In addition, recent studies conclude that alternative street designs can have a significant and desirable impact on environmental quality.

A change in the way you look at street systems can begin by evaluating your system using the checklist that follows.

Street networks are the threads that weave a community together and give it physical form.





There are a number of site design characteristics that can enhance the success of small communities. In most cases these characteristics are already apparent in the “original town” portions of the community. The Site Design Checklists below are divided into recommendations for residential properties and commercial properties.

Residential Properties

- Encourage developers to front public open space with public streets rather than putting the parkland behind a row of homes. This results in the open space being truly public and the value enhancement of being near the open space spreads further into the development.
- Get the garages off the front. At a minimum, the garage should be sixteen feet behind the front building line. This allows for the cars to be parked between the houses rather than out in front of them. At best the garage should be off an alley in the rear.
- Consider allowing houses to be placed closer to the street, resulting in a larger rear yard, and encourage garage door placement behind the front façade of the house.
- Encourage combined or shared driveways to reduce the amount of pavement required for each house.
- Site home fronting on collector streets. Access can be from side streets or from alleyways in the rear. This presents a better face to the area where people get their first impression of your community, your streets. It also supports using the streets as amenities.

Commercial Properties

- Encourage placement of commercial buildings close to the street, similar to the location of buildings in the original downtown. This creates a far more interesting streetscape, provides a pedestrian friendly atmosphere and contributes to a sense of place.
- Allow on street parking for customer convenience and added protection for pedestrians from vehicular traffic.
- Support or require off street parking to occur along the side or in the rear reducing the impact of parked cars. Break up the parking into smaller lots.
- Provide pedestrian connections from neighborhoods to commercial areas and enhance these connections with landscaping and other pedestrian amenities.
- Encourage wide sidewalks in front of retail to facilitate pedestrian use, and allow for sidewalk cafes, sales, etc.
- Provide for commercial development in smaller blocks. Where larger sites are necessary, bisect the site with a public street. Smaller block patterns allow for easier redevelopment of the site after the “big box” leaves.
- Provide civic space within commercial areas for special events or community gatherings. These should not be located in parking lots.

Street Design Checklist

- Identify areas where roads should not be placed (steep slopes, historic areas, wetlands etc.)
- In rolling terrain, the land itself should guide the layout of the roadway using the existing conditions to create interest and retain community identity.
- Identify community activity centers and connect these centers in as many ways as possible.
- Promote access and land-use integration within the community. In recent years, road systems within developments have been designed to discourage access and neighborhoods are viewed from the outside, identifying individual neighborhoods rather than connecting them to the community as a whole.
- Streets should be designed with the quality of the trip in mind. The need to get from point A to point B is no reason to have the trip be less than enjoyable. Significant buildings, open space, and activity centers should be considered and planned as focal points along major routes.
- Community design must accommodate pedestrians, bicyclists and motor vehicles.
- Is your traffic engineer your de-facto planner? Good circulation planning responds to topography, water bodies, wetlands and public utilities.
- Provide network options in your street system. Dispersing traffic to alternative routes rather than continually adding lanes to existing streets better solves/avoids congestion. Provide more, smaller streets.
- Plan locations of your communities “Great Streets” and insure that primary civic uses are located along them. The Kansas City Boulevard system is an excellent example.
- Review street design standards to insure a variety of design options are encouraged and allowed depending on site location and anticipated use of the street. Include alleys where appropriate, design neighborhood streets at a pedestrian scale (typically 26 feet wide, curb to curb with parking on both sides), and consider providing standards for boulevards, parkways and avenues for lower speed traffic.
- Design streets for both the motorist and non-motorist
- Research a variety of traffic calming measures including roundabouts, narrower streets and on street parking.
- Promote local street connectivity increasing walking, bicycling and transit use and thereby reducing the demand to further expand major streets. Encourage access within and between neighborhoods.
- Streets should be viewed as the significant community investment they are and be designed as any other permanent, community defining, public space. They do not just move traffic. Include standards for street furniture, planting and details, provide for buildings to come closer to the curb and to front the street. De-emphasize parking lots and encourage pedestrian activity in commercial areas.
- Foster unique and attractive streetscapes that protect and enhance neighborhood livability
- Minimize impervious cover to gain environmental and ecological benefits