

Creating the Missing Hub

HOW TODAY'S SUBURBS BUILD TOWN CENTERS


by Philip Langdon

Something is absent from many American suburbs.

Not schools; those are mandatory. Not housing; there's plenty of that. Not gas stations, restaurants, and strip shopping; those abound, especially in suburbs that grew up after the Second World War.

No, the ingredient missing from many suburbs is a "town center," a place people head to for many different purposes – to shop, dine, visit a library, deliver a package to the post office, take in a movie or a concert, or just to enjoy being in an animated public place. Until the 1940s, nearly every sizable community had a center where people could conduct their everyday activities while feeling a buzz of sociability. The development of pedestrian-scale community hubs, however, ground to a halt as cities and suburbs became increasingly oriented to a sprawling, automobile-dominated land use pattern.

Now that's changing.

Since the beginning of Mashpee Commons on Cape Cod in the mid-1980s and the construction of Mizner Park in Boca Raton, Florida, in 1990, mixed-use town centers have become an ever more common type of development.  Mizner Park. They are cropping up in all sorts of localities – from postwar bedroom communities, to new suburban areas, to old

¹ Editor's Note: For more on these approaches, see: Greg Dale, "Smart Growth," *PCJ* #50; Edward McMahon, "Smart Growth Trends," *PCJ* #33; Philip Langdon, "New Development, Traditional Patterns," *PCJ* #36; and Sarah James, "Moving Towards Sustainability in Planning and Zoning," *PCJ* #47. All of the above articles are available to order and immediately download from our PlannersWeb site: <www.plannersweb.com>.

towns whose industries have collapsed, leaving "brownfield" sites that need new uses.

DEFINING A VISION

Town centers vary greatly in size, character, and purpose. To get a center that fits local desires, "the municipality must define its goals," says Macon Toledano, vice president of Warwick, New York-based LeylandAlliance, which is developing a mixed-use center in the

perimeter, not visible from the main street. Only a small percentage of lifestyle centers have housing or office space. Despite their current popularity, some planners and retail experts worry that lifestyle centers, essentially open-air malls, won't fare well in the long run but will lose appeal, as has already happened with many middling-quality enclosed malls.

If the goals of the municipality are those of new urbanism, smart growth, or sustainability, the community will tend to favor "concentrated, pedestrian-oriented, mixed-use environments with a focus on the public realm," Toledano says.¹

St. Louis Park, a postwar suburb of Minneapolis, used a community visioning process to define its objectives. In 1994 the 11-square-mile municipality began its visioning, which revealed people's desire for "a town center, a community focal point," according to Community Development Director Kevin Locke.

"That led to setting up a community-wide charrette," which developed a plan for 125 acres, including a tired-looking 16-acre area containing strip commercial buildings along heavily traveled Excelsior Boulevard, and 17 small single-family houses.

Today the 16 acres, adjacent to a municipal park, are occupied by a town center called Excelsior and Grand. Three stories of housing rise above ground-floor stores, restaurants, and child care facilities. The development has rental apartments, condominium units, inconspicuous mid-block parking garages, and a police substation, plus public spaces where a farmers' market and summer



Rendering of a portion of the proposed 15 acre town center for Mansfield, Connecticut.

Town of Mansfield, Connecticut, near the University of Connecticut's main campus. "The work of the municipality," he says, "is in educating themselves as to the differences and defining their choices in advance" before seeking a developer.

A suburb that's happy with postwar patterns of development may opt for what the real estate industry calls a "lifestyle center." Lifestyle centers tend to arrange their stores and restaurants so that their doors and windows face onto sidewalks and a privately operated Main Street, as at "The Avenue at White Marsh," a lifestyle center off Interstate 95 east of Baltimore. The centers' large parking lots are usually situated on the

events take place. The \$130 million project, which broke ground in October 2001, will have 87,000 square feet of retail and commercial space and 660 housing units by its completion in 2007.

Westlake, Ohio, a 34,000-person suburb 15 miles west of Cleveland, began envisioning a town center – something the community lacked – on 75 acres along a major road, Crocker Boulevard, in 1999. “About the same time,” recalls Westlake Planning and Economic Development Director Robert Parry, “developer Robert Stark arrived, said he had been to Mizner Park, and came in with a design by the same person who had designed Mizner Park, Richard Heapes.” The result was the opening in November 2004 of a town center called Crocker Park.

Before Stark was allowed to start building, several local officials and planning board members visited high-quality recent centers, including Mizner Park; CityPlace in West Palm Beach, Florida; and Santana Row in San Jose, California. “We went to these places, talked with officials, and found out what worked and what didn’t,” Parry notes.

When Stark and the city agreed on the concept, the city included in its approvals a series of requirements to lock in the pedestrian-oriented, mixed-use nature of the center. Among the requirements: that 50 percent of the center’s floor area would be residential and at least half the parking would be in garages or decks.

“Once you’ve got the vision, you have to mandate it in some legislation, but allow yourself some flexibility,” Parry advises. Written guarantees ensure that the developer cannot dilute the concept when difficulties arise. Westlake specified that buildings would have to be at least two stories high so that outdoor spaces would be adequately defined. The city also required housing with an urban character.

The first 162 units built were rental apartments above stores on Main Street. The current phase will include two-story, three-story, and perhaps some

continued on next page



PHILIP LANGDON

Apartments and offices in Mizner Park are located above storefronts (though most housing is located on nearby streets), while parking garages are carefully located behind the central, tree-lined promenade.



Mizner Park

One of the most successful centers of the last 20 years –

in attracting people and assembling a vibrant mix of housing, offices, stores, restaurants, and outdoor space – is Mizner Park, which came about through the intervention of the Boca Raton Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA). In the latter half of the 1980s, the conventional Boca Raton Mall was failing, so the CRA acquired the mall and its underlying 29 acres, and negotiated to lease 12 of those acres to a developer, Crocker & Company, with the understanding that Crocker would build a pedestrian-oriented mixed-use center.

With its pink stucco walls, lush landscape, and packed restaurants, Mizner Park became a stand-out – and an inspiration for other communities interested in getting a town center. The core of Mizner Park, is a broad open space offering “some of the qualities of a grand European plaza.”² On two sides of the plaza-like space – which is outfitted with benches, gazebos, brick-paved walkways, and banyan and palm trees – the developer constructed shops and restaurants, sheltered beneath awnings and arcades. Several stories of offices and balconied apartments rise directly on top of the retail.

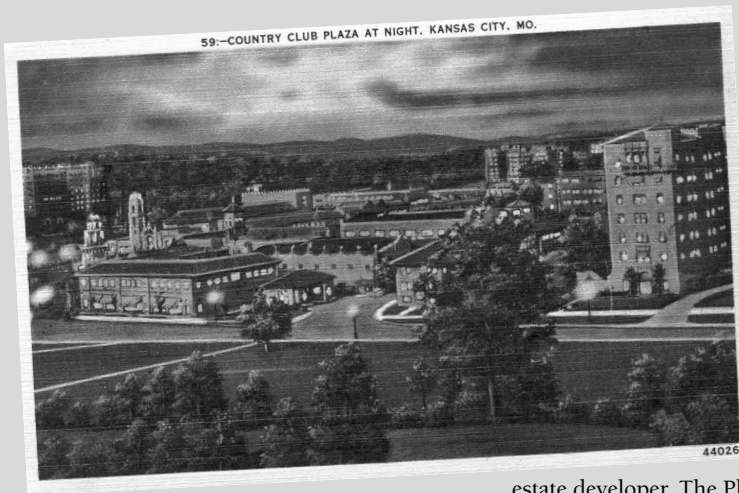
It’s quite a mix. By 1992, the initial 12 acres contained 136 apartments, 106,000 square feet of offices, 156,000 square feet of retail, dining, and entertainment (including an eight-screen cinema), and an amphitheater. Since then, developers have added to the 29-acre tract a museum,



an arts center, an 80,000-square-foot store, a 180,000-square-foot office building, a nine-story apartment building, and 24 townhouses.

Popular though Mizner Park is, it needed public investment before a developer could economically take on such a complicated undertaking. In the late eighties the CRA recommended that the city purchase the property by issuing \$58 million in bonds, which would be repaid through tax-increment financing. Some Boca Raton residents expressed unease, so the bond issue was put up for a citywide referendum. The voters overwhelmingly approved it. More than a decade and a half after opening, Mizner is financially successful and has become Boca Raton’s best-known attraction, drawing people from miles around.

² Charles C. Bohl, *Place Making: Developing Town Centers, Main Streets, and Urban Villages* (Urban Land Institute, 2002). Bohl is Director of the University of Miami’s Knight Program in Community Building.



59—COUNTRY CLUB PLAZA AT NIGHT. KANSAS CITY, MO.

44026



Looking Back: Country Club Plaza

Built by Kansas City businessman J.C. Nichols more than 75 years ago, the still-thriving Country Club Plaza is considered America's first suburban shopping center development. In truth, it is much more akin to the kind of mixed use, town center developments covered in Phil Langdon's article. It combines retail shopping, office space, theaters, and a substantial amount of housing all in close proximity.

When Nichols first planned Country Club Plaza in 1922, many Kansas Citians felt the 55 acre project far too big – and remote from the city's core. In fact, before opening it

Housing surrounds the Country Club Plaza's commercial core. Even with its through streets, the Plaza offers a relaxing environment enjoyed by residents and visitors.



© ISTOCKPHOTO.COM / JENNIFER TRENCHARD

gained the moniker “Nichols’ Folly.” But the Plaza was an immediate success – and has, if anything, grown more popular over the years.

At least three factors have been integral to this outcome. The first was Nichols’ role as a real

estate developer. The Plaza served as an important selling point for nearby subdivisions and apartments built by the J.C. Nichols Company – and these residents became regular patrons of the Plaza’s establishments.

Second was the attention Nichols gave to aesthetics, adorning the Plaza with fountains (a Kansas City tradition), murals, decorated tiles, and many pieces of sculpture. Also the buildings, designed in a Spanish style but with distinctive features, don’t have the bland, homogeneous feel that sometimes results when a project is controlled by a single developer.

A third key factor was the flexibility of the J.C. Nichols Company in adjusting the mix of businesses to reflect changing market

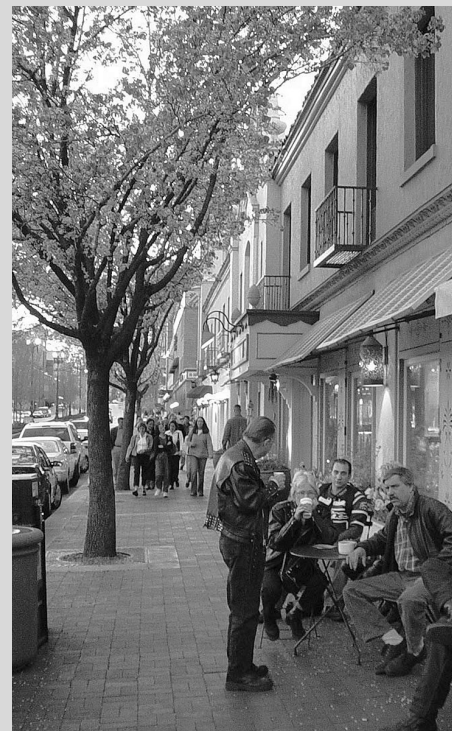
demand, while preserving the Plaza’s distinct local identity. Not only have many Kansas City-based retailers long been part of the Plaza, but the Plaza has become home to several important events for Kansas City residents, including an annual art show and the seasonal lighting of its buildings.

Interestingly, while the Plaza was designed in the 1920s primarily to attract the new automobile-owning suburbanites (with its ample parking garages), it has evolved into a much more urban, pedestrian-oriented district. In part, this is due to suburban development having far outspread the Plaza’s now central location. But the Plaza’s design and amenities have made for a delightful area to walk, shop, work, or reside. I can personally attest to this, having worked in the early 1980s for a firm having office space in the Plaza.

—Wayne Senville, Editor



DAN TASHMAN



DAN TASHMAN



PHOTOS: ROBERT PARRY (UNLESS NOTED OTHERWISE)

IMAGE REPORT, CROCKER PARK LLC

AERIAL RENDERING, CROCKER PARK LLC

A Day at Crocker Park

The aerial rendering of Crocker Park in Westlake, Ohio, shows the main streets that bisect the development; garage parking is provided behind the central core. One key to a successful town center project is creating an attractive environment for pedestrians – that includes making sure sidewalks are kept clean and providing comfortable seating for tired walkers!

Creating the Missing Hub...

continued from previous page

narrow four-story townhouses – “close to the street, with stairs and stoops in front and some garden patios in front, *a la* brownstones of Washington, D.C., or Boston,” Parry says. A row of residential lofts will have its back to a parking deck, concealing part of a building that is best put out of sight. “Liner” townhouses will hide two walls of a large, two-story sporting goods store. Two-family houses – side-by-side units of 3,000 square feet

each – will form part of the development’s perimeter, next to an existing neighborhood of detached houses. Urban-style housing options – units that suit young people and empty nesters, who like being able to walk to restaurants and other amenities – are proving popular in town centers because they fill a gap in the suburban housing market.

Voters approved the development in 2000, and construction began in 2003. So far, about 750,000 square feet, including a 16-screen cinema, have been built,

and another 300,000 square feet have been approved, including a hotel. At completion, Crocker Park will contain 1.7 million square feet and will be home to approximately 2,000 residents.

DESIGNING FOR PEDESTRIANS

Town centers must strive to be comfortable for pedestrians. Centuries of city and town life have shown that people often enjoy being in an “outdoor room” – an open-air space where the buildings

continued on next page



In Fairview, Oregon, the new library (above) and city hall (below) are part of a 95-acre mixed use village adjoining the “old town” neighborhood (built between 1890 and 1940). All civic buildings can be spotted by their distinctive arched entryways.

Public Buildings in Town Centers

Part of what makes a town center more valuable and beloved than a shopping center is civic features: public gathering places and buildings such as libraries, municipal offices, museums, post offices, cultural institutions. Civic functions diversify a center, broaden its appeal, and make the center something that people will want to preserve beyond the next fickle retail cycle.

Public buildings do complicate a project. “It is a lot more difficult to ‘recruit’ a town hall, post office, museum, or library than it is to lease space,” says Charles Bohl at the University of Miami. “Civic and public institutions require a lot of time and public process; a Starbucks just needs five minutes with a leasing agent if the site is right.”

Architect and retail adviser Seth Harry points out that libraries and other institutions

have their own consultants “telling them that they have to think of themselves in the same way that retailers do, in terms of market capture, accessibility, parking, etc. And of course, the retail models they are choosing to emulate are the big-box suburban retail models.”

Consequently, some effort may be needed to persuade institutions that they should be in a mixed-use, pedestrian-scale center. Prominent sites should be reserved for them from the outset, with no illusions that institutions will move in quickly. At Mizner Park, Bohl notes, “it took over a dozen years to get the museum and current amphitheater funded and built.” Since conventional zoning discourages mixed uses, the community may also have to change the zoning.

The presence of multiple property owners, with varied personalities and outlooks, would make a town center more like a traditional downtown, though this would also complicate its management. In many cases, developers lease space (rather than sell it) to organizations such as the Postal Service or a library.

One mixed-use development that has attracted a range of civic uses is Fairview Village, in Fairview, Oregon, east of Portland. Developer Holt & Haugh built a 7,500-square-foot building and leased it to the Postal Service. It has been “an excellent draw since day one,” says its architect, Bill Dennis, adding that “the intercession of a Congressman was needed to change the federal design standards from something that looked like a Burger King to something a bit more civic.”

The municipality also constructed a city hall, its council chambers conspicuously situated on the second floor behind a large arched window. “All the civic buildings have an arch of some sort, to encourage citizens to enter,” Dennis observes. The center has an elementary school and a day-care center, and the Multnomah County Library system leased a 6,000-square-foot space that has four apartments above. “The younger crowd, ages 7-14, have commandeered the library as their ‘third place’ after school,” notes Rick Holt, of Holt & Haugh.

With perseverance and the right developer, a town center can be much more than a place to eat, drink, and spend.



Creating the Missing Hub...

continued from previous page

along the perimeter have walls high enough to produce a sense of enclosure.


Town centers frequently borrow their proportions from streets and squares that have proven popular in old towns and cities. Mizner Park emulates the proportions of Piazza Navona in Rome. When developer Buff Chace and his partner Douglas Storrs set out to transform a small strip shopping center in the Town of Mashpee, near the western end of Cape Cod, into a traditional center, they devised a plan for filling in some of the parking area with a grid of streets lined by sidewalks and attractive building facades – fronts that would have doors, display windows, and other elements that make walking interesting and enjoyable.



Mashpee Commons on Cape Cod has been a successful example of modern town center development.

The buildings that Chace and Storrs have erected at Mashpee Commons in the past 20 years are mostly two or three stories high, the same as in many 19th-century towns. Streets are narrow enough for people to cross easily. Shops and restaurants occupy the ground floors, with offices or apartments upstairs. One of the challenges in designing a pedestrian-oriented center is how to fit large buildings into the mix. At Mashpee Commons, the cinema complex is not a free-standing, big box; instead, it is integrated into the streetscape, with a curving front that opens onto a plaza and with retail space along its street frontage, subtly encouraging moviegoers to circulate throughout the center.

Parking at Mashpee Commons comes in two forms: dispersed parking lots around the periphery, and on-street parking. Curbside parking is important. It appeals to motorists thinking they might be able to park in front of their destination, and it creates a buffer zone that shields pedestrians – physically and psychologically – from traffic. In larger centers, structured parking, preferably partly hidden behind stores, housing, or offices, is often necessary.

Housing and offices strengthen a center. “Adding more residential density should be part of any town center proposal, both as a way to help support goods and services and as a means to enhance a sense of community,” says Seth Harry, an architect and retail consultant based in Woodbine, Maryland. Housing will accomplish the most if it’s placed right over the shops or adjacent to them, conveniently connected by streets and sidewalks. Developers have also provided space for post offices, public libraries, and other civic and cultural functions, which help bring in residents from the surrounding area on a regular basis.  *Public Buildings*

A growing number of centers are being built at light rail or commuter rail stations, like Orenco Station, a mixed-use center in Hillsboro, Oregon, served by metropolitan Portland’s MAX light rail

line. There are efforts as well to create mixed-use centers around bus stations. The introduction of quieter, more comfortable buses with faster service – and with engines that don’t emit thick plumes of diesel exhaust – is helping to make this kind of development more feasible than it once was.

Renton, Washington, in the southern suburbs of Seattle, several years ago decided to create a vibrant center in its faded old downtown by concentrating density and activity near a hub of King County bus routes. To accomplish its goal, the municipality encouraged auto dealers to move from a location near a bus interchange and then acquired five acres there. The municipality built a parking garage, constructed a plaza capable of accommodating a farmers’ market, and enticed developers to erect shops and hundreds of housing units. As a result, the area around the bus hub seems “totally different” from its lackluster character in the mid-1990s, says Mark Hinshaw, an urban designer for LMN Architects in Seattle. The endeavor would not have succeeded without close collaboration between the municipality and the King County government on meshing transit and development.

Whether there is much mass transit or not, it’s important that a town center *continued on next page*



Renton’s new transit center is located close to recently constructed housing.



© PAT BOGUSZ. IMAGE FROM BIGSTOCKPHOTO.COM

Editor’s Note:
 **A Place to Go**

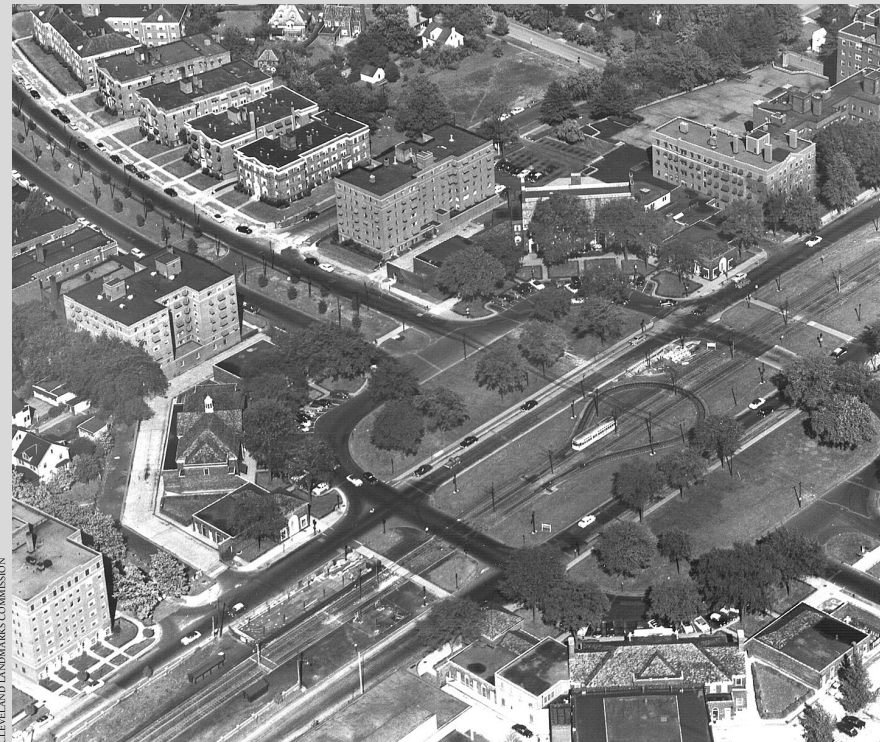
While it may cause a chuckle to read about the need for public restrooms in our town centers, it’s no laughing matter when you have a pleading six-year-old in tow; a senior citizen with urologic problems; or when you yourself have to go. Yet America’s cities and towns have been shamefully negligent in providing publicly accessible restrooms.

This is no minor issue for communities seeking to develop or strengthen their town centers. Senior citizens, families with small children, bicyclists, and many others take into account the potential availability of clean restrooms in planning their shopping or recreational trips.

“Since the 1980s, Seattle business owners have said the lack of public restrooms was the top issue facing downtown,” reports Kathy Mulady in an article for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* on the city’s installation of “five self-cleaning, space-age style” public restrooms.¹ But similar complaints can be heard nationwide.

The provision of clean, easily accessible public restrooms should be part and parcel of every town center development. This is particularly important given the trend of restaurants to limit access to their facilities. While there are certainly issues to deal with in providing public restrooms, they are not insurmountable – especially in light of the cost of not accommodating our most basic needs.

¹ *Post-Intelligencer*, March 2, 2004.



CLEVELAND LANDMARKS COMMISSION

This 1957 aerial photo shows Shaker Square's octagonal plan, with commercial establishments (including a movie theater) bordering the central square, and apartment buildings nearby.



Looking Back: Shaker Square

Shaker Square is recognized as America's second-oldest suburban shopping district – antedated only by Country Club Plaza (see page 6). Built between 1927 and '29 as part of Cleveland's emerging Shaker Heights suburb, Shaker Square is designed as an octagonal shopping area flanked by residential development, and

bisected by a rapid transit rail line that connects downtown Cleveland and several inner suburbs.

Over the years, Shaker Square has remained a popular destination. While much smaller than Country Club Plaza and many of today's planned town center developments, Shaker Square's link to public transit continues to benefit residents and shoppers.

—Wayne Senville, Editor



CHER SHAPERO

Creating the Missing Hub...

continued from previous page

have a circulation network that makes it easy for residents of nearby neighborhoods to walk to the center. That helps energize and add customers for the center, and it may reduce automobile trips.

CHALLENGES FOR MUNICIPALITIES

Compared to a conventional mall or a lifestyle center, it takes longer to plan, approve, and construct a town center that mixes uses and includes civic elements. Because of their complexity, mixed-use projects are often built in phases over several years, making them long-term endeavors for municipal officials. "It took over a year to get financing" for Crocker Park after the proposal won approval at the polls, says Parry, attributing the long interval to the mixture of uses – particularly residential over retail – not common in Ohio at the time and still out of the ordinary in many locales. Once ground was broken, the city had to allocate staff to ensure the project was built properly. "We had some building and engineering inspectors on the site eight hours a day," Parry says.

To create Excelsior and Grand, St. Louis Park assembled 37 properties. "It cost \$18 million to acquire and clear the properties and do some environmental cleanup and relocation," says City Manager Tom Harmening. The first developer chosen by the city failed to produce. The second, TOLD Development Company of nearby Plymouth, which had never built a mixed-use center, succeeded, but only after "we went through about 45 pro-formas and 20 site plans to get the right balance between parking and retail and park space and housing," says TOLD principal Bob Cunningham.

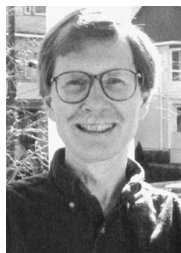
"Too many municipalities incorrectly assume that they are sitting on a gold mine, and all they have to do is publish an RFP and then stand back and pick from a long line of highly qualified suitors," says Seth Harry, who works on centers across North America. "Too often they're surprised when no qualified developer responds. To avoid this scenario, it is critically important for the

municipality to do its homework, including undertaking a credible market analysis and perhaps even engaging specialists to help them understand and tailor their RFP.” In most cases, he notes, the municipality will be expected to provide incentives, such as infrastructure improvements, low-interest loans, tax-increment financing, or bonding capacity.

Governing entities may have to determine whether streets in the center will be public or private. Developers often prefer private streets because they can build them with narrower, more pleasing dimensions, close them to vehicles during special events, and control activity more tightly. But private streets usually mean that the constitutional rights of free speech and assembly available in public areas are restricted. To balance the claims of security and liberty, municipalities might follow the model of setting up business improvement districts – entities that are allowed to police their territory but without the right to treat it as private turf.

Difficult and time-consuming as town centers are, they can add immeasurably to community pride and satisfaction, while boosting the tax base. Charles Bohl, director of the Knight Program in Community Building at the University of Miami, regards such centers as “live, work, play” settings that answer a widespread hunger for community life. “We are still in the infancy of reintroducing town centers after six decades of *not* building them but destroying them at a rapid clip,” he says. The centers that have emerged in recent years are all imperfect. But they point in the right direction – toward a much-needed rebirth of public gathering places. ♦

Philip Langdon is senior editor of *New Urban News*, a national newsletter on community design, and author of several books, including *A Better Place to Live: Reshaping the American Suburb* (University of Massachusetts Press). He lives in New Haven, Connecticut.



Advice From a Town Center Builder

Michael Mehaffy served as project manager for developer PacTrust on Orenco Station, a popular mixed-use center in Hillsboro, Oregon, west of Portland. Since the 1990s, 2,000 houses, apartments, lofts, and live-work units have been built within a quarter-mile of Orenco Center’s core of shops, offices, and cafés. Mehaffy offers this advice for planners and planning board members:

- *First do your homework.* Identify catchment areas, likely market demand, and access (either existing or to be created) before designating a new town center location. Check your assumptions, and mercilessly discard or shift locations that do not meet these basic requirements.
- *Partner early* with progressive entities from the private sector. They have knowledge that you will need, and you have the ability to provide infrastructure and entitlements that they will need.
- *Be prepared to change your “operating system.”* Recognize the changes you will need to the zoning, traffic, building codes, fire and life safety codes, and all the rest, to be able to build a successful project in the designated area. Consider the new alternative coding methodologies. Recognize that you will have to make modifications along the way.

• *Take a flexible approach.* Even with a more enlightened set of ordinances, you will have to be adaptive to evolving market conditions and other dynamic aspects of the project. It is a long and significant challenge working through the thicket of remaining regulatory requirements, and your staff must be committed to the collaborative problem-solving needed to implement your own policy goals.

- *Team up with experts* who also bring key knowledge that you will need.
- *Assist with innovative financing strategies.* Many projects with very attractive long-term economics (not to mention greater public benefit) still pose significant initial diseconomies. Recognize that you may have to provide or enable financial incentives, such as tax-increment financing, tax credits, density bonuses, or other mechanisms.
- *Bring the local stakeholders into the process early.* Do not let them paralyze the process – but give them a role and a voice. They have important information, and a right to participate in a structured way.
- *Learn from history.* Do not slavishly copy the successful examples from the past – but don’t ignore them for the sake of novelty either. Take an evolutionary approach, recognizing the highest-quality local precedents balanced with new opportunities. Require your applicants to do likewise.



As with most town center projects, the Excelsior and Grand development in St. Louis Park, Minnesota, mixes housing with commercial development.