

# Livable Places Update

*Emerging Trends in Community Planning and Design*

November 2013

www.lgc.org

## **Retrofitting Suburbia - Sustainable Placemaking for Existing Communities:**

Whether you see suburbs as the epitome of the American Dream or a smart-growth advocate's worst nightmare, their future will play a distinctive role in the region where you live. Separate from the question of how and where to place new growth, existing suburbs across California face the threat of becoming dilapidated ghost towns as developers continue their hunt for cheap land for new development - pushing suburban rings further outward thus increasing infrastructure costs and threatening our health and the environment.

"Social and market trends offer the potential to transform America's suburban business districts into more vibrant, pedestrian friendly live-work-shop places," according to the Urban Land Institute. "Currently, such reinvented places are in short supply, as most suburban business districts encompass a disparate group of isolated uses with little or no integration, a transportation system that is automobile-oriented and often hostile to pedestrians, and a near total absence of civic identity."

Rancho Cordova City Councilmember David Sander, chair of the First Tier Suburbs Council of the National League of Cities, stressed the importance of regional collaborations in dealing with this issue in a recent Sacramento Bee editorial: "Suburban sustainability is one of the most serious issues facing our region, and it should command some of our best work and regional collaboration in finding good solutions for sustaining our aging suburban and urban communities."

Innovative local governments can take a number of steps to breathe life into existing commercial corridors and partner with local entrepreneurs, property owners and community members to create unique, attractive places.

According to Michele Reeves, founder of Civilis Consultants, we have two choices for how to address our aging suburbs - change them or leverage them. Reeves shared this with Sacramento leaders as part of a technical assistance effort through Portland State University's Urban Sustainability Accelerator program.

**Change It:** Cities like Lancaster, CA, and West Palm Beach, FL, are changing their run-down corridors, redesigning them to attract new businesses and people.

*Revitalizing Lancaster Boulevard:* Like many communities, Lancaster faced the loss of major employers like Lockheed-Martin and disinvestment in their historic downtown as big box stores and regional malls captured new commercial growth. Crime increased and the historic downtown deteriorated rapidly.

The City of Lancaster fought to preserve the fabric of their community by adopting a form-based code in 2008 to encourage mixed uses and a pedestrian-friendly streetscape for the downtown Lancaster Boulevard corridor. Architecture and planning firm Moule & Polyzoides helped the city to draw in people and new businesses by redesigning the boulevard to build on opportunities created by the code.

The result has been an increased investment in the area:

- 49 new businesses opened along the boulevard, and revenue almost doubled compared to just before the work began.
- Downtown property values rose by almost 10%.
- 800 new permanent jobs, 1,100 temporary construction jobs, and an estimated \$273 million in economic output were generated.
- 800 new and rehabbed homes brought more residents into the neighborhood.
- Roadway safety was dramatically increased, with traffic collisions cut in half and collisions with personal injury cut by 85%.

*Traffic Calming in West Palm Beach:* West Palm Beach was facing deterioration due to several factors, including poor planning that focused solely on people driving cars, most of whom had moved further and further out of the urban areas into suburbs.

Almost half of the city's population is low- to moderate-income, generally living in the "pre-suburb," older parts of the city which are inundated with downtown traffic. The majority of people working in the downtown (25% of the County's employment base) live outside of it - typically in neighborhoods unaffected by the traffic they generate.

Meanwhile, the area became dilapidated and perceived as a dangerous hot spot for illegal activities, further eroding the street environment and the sense of community.

In the mid-1990s, the City of West Palm Beach adopted a Downtown Master Plan that set design standards for new construction and greatly simplified the permitting process.

They also started a traffic calming program that focused on the pre-suburb areas of the city. The program focused on economic development, revitalization, aesthetics, pedestrian comfort and safety, and driver behavior modification, resulting in intense redevelopment activity.

Other City programs, ranging from homeownership to facade enhancements, complemented the program. This comprehensive, coordinated approach to city building has helped stabilize and revive the downtown and several challenged neighborhoods, while stimulating significant private investment.

Traffic calming can affect an area's surroundings and provide private investors with confidence that the local government is an interested and involved partner. It is a powerful tool to help improve the downtown, revitalize challenged neighborhoods, create street and civic pride, beautify the public realm, create a sense of safety, and provide an appealing sense of place and community.

**Leverage It:** Communities can leverage their existing assets by building identity, creating connections, and providing a vision.

*Building identity:* A community can break up sections along arterials to create distinct districts that reflect the community's ethos by better identifying the area's context (cultural diversity, industries, businesses, markets, entertainment) and defining the site (what's noteworthy, the story the buildings tell).

*Creating connectivity:* People should be able to connect to the district physically and emotionally. That means businesses are located near other attractive destinations. They welcome all users and are built in an accessible, inviting way - through design tactics that include hiding parking, building public amenities and outdoor seating along the edge.

With growing competition from large Internet retail providers, local businesses must also form emotional connections with their customers. Businesses should provide people with an experience and "speak to the street" through lighting, street level windows, inviting outdoor displays and comfortable seating.

This goes beyond retail and restaurants. Service and auto uses can drive business and also contribute to community placemaking by creating a pedestrian dialogue.

*Providing a vision:* Through façade programs and other incentives, local governments can leverage what they have to turn suburban corridors around. Simple fixes such as street-facing windows, colorful paint and outdoor seating can be much cheaper than a demolition or complete renovation - and can catalyze additional investment.

Reeves has another word of advice for local governments: Think local - you are more likely to have success attracting local businesses and developers willing to invest in the revitalization of existing districts.

Big businesses follow market demand and incentives, and are likely to follow them out of your community. Local government and their communities can react effectively:

- Reuse existing buildings first.
- Reorient policies to celebrate small businesses. Policies in many communities are designed for national tenants and not applicable to the small entrepreneurial tenants who will help breathe life into your corridor.
- Be proactive in helping to identify the ten-

ants you would like to see, build relationships with them and help shepherd their initial projects through.

- Be flexible and creative.

### **What Are Local Governments Doing?**

*San Diego encourages outdoor seating:* In May, the City of San Diego approved an overhaul to their outdoor dining regulations to ease the permit process for sidewalk cafes. Under the previous rules, it could take months and cost owners as much as \$10,000 to \$12,000 to secure required permits.

With the changes, approval time for sidewalk cafes was cut from 3-4 months to less than a month, and permit fees were lowered to an average of \$1,200.

*Oakland spruces up storefronts:* The City of Oakland has facade improvement programs for West Oakland and the downtown that offer matching grants for exterior building renovations to property and business owners in key commercial corridors. The program also offers free, limited architectural design services and between \$10,000 and \$30,000 depending on the building's size.

*San Jose grants cover permits, fees and taxes:* San Jose launched a \$250,000 StoreFronts Initiative to encourage people to open shop in downtown San Jose and its 12 business districts.

"We want to take empty storefronts and turn them from vacant to vibrant, and really help the small businessperson that wants to open a store in San Jose," said Kim Welsh, the city's economic development director, in a recent NBC interview. The initiative will help new business owners open a new store by providing \$16,000 in grants to help cover the cost of city permits, fees and taxes.

*Sacramento encourages new downtown businesses:* In an attempt to attract businesses and jobs downtown and in the city's commercial areas, the City of Sacramento last year cut the number of parking spaces that new businesses are required to create.

The previous law was time- and cost-prohibitive, especially for small businesses. For example, a downtown restaurant would have to create on-site parking if they had even one seat for customers. But, because there is no room on its property for parking, the business would have been required to apply for a parking waiver, which typically takes months, and pay a fee of \$4,000 to \$12,000.

The new policies have drawn support from builders, advocates for lower-income housing, transit and pedestrians.