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TOWN/CITY CENTERS

Description:

A town or city center is a compact area with a mix of elements—retail, office, commercial, residential, entertainment, cultural, parks, recreational, libraries, schools, civic offices, and others. These concentrated areas include aspects that "meet basic human needs for goods and services; but, depending upon their purpose and location, they may also be hubs for jobs, transportation, entertainment, or recreation."¹ Town centers come in many shapes and sizes and range from urban downtown areas to small town Main Streets. "Well-designed town centers are easily accessible by area residents, are pedestrian friendly, and provide a gateway to other parts of the community."²

Often, a Town or City Center will include dense housing development, which allows residents to take advantage of the nearby shopping, transit, employment, and other amenities; and residential areas adjacent to a Town or City Center are often traditional in design—including such features as narrower residential streets, porches, etc.

Municipalities can re-develop and revitalize existing centers—hamlets, downtowns, Main Streets, Brownfield Opportunity Areas, and others—or, they can create new town centers. Both options generally meet with greater community acceptance because they concentrate development in areas seen as more appropriate for compact, mixed-use design. Successful town and city centers project a better image of density and mixed-use to residents, workers, developers, municipal officials, visitors, and tourists, which can allay public concerns about this alternative form of development.

References:

^{1,2} *What is a Town Center?* Fact Sheet No. 7. Eureka, MN: Eureka Township Envisioning Task Force: <http://eurekatownship-mn.us/taskforce/openhouse/FS%207-Town%20Center.pdf>.

Benefits:

For residents:

- The compact character of Town and City Centers provides easier access to transit options and maximizes opportunities to use alternative mobility modes such as walking, biking, and small-motor vehicles.
- Proximity of a mix of community elements in a Center, as well as proximity of housing to the Center, allows easier, quicker, more efficient access to the features and amenities needed to conduct routine activities of daily life—allowing frail older people and people with both chronic and temporary disabilities (who may regularly require assistance with accomplishing routine daily trips and

tasks) to conduct these tasks with less/no assistance, thereby achieving a greater sense of independence, competency, and self-esteem that accompanies decreased dependency on others.

For communities:

- Proximity of elements such as schools, libraries, town squares, restaurants, recreational areas, and civic offices increases their use as social gathering places—providing residents and organizations with a stronger sense of community identity and pride, a greater sense of place, and a more active and vibrant community atmosphere.
- For rural areas, a well-designed, compact, mixed-use town center allows sizeable growth without compromising the integrity of the area's rural character, taking up farm land, or using open spaces.
- According to the Eureka, MN, Township Envisioning Task Force, "creation or redesign of a Town Center can also be coupled with Transfer of Development Rights programs, with the town center acting as the receiving zone and outlying areas acting as sending zones."³

Reference:

³ *What is a Town Center?* Fact Sheet No. 7. Eureka, MN: Eureka Township Envisioning Task Force: <http://eurekatownship-mn.us/taskforce/openhouse/FS%207-Town%20Center.pdf>.

Impediments or barriers to development or implementation:

- Low-density, single-use zoning makes Town or City Center communities illegal or difficult to re-zone; and public opposition and misperceptions add to the difficulty.

Resource—examples and ordinances:

- Town Centers District, Washington Township, NJ.
On Pace Law School, Land Use Law Center, web site:
<http://landuse.law.pace.edu/landuse/documents/laws/reg3/WashingtonNJTownCenterDist.doc>
- Village Center Zone Ordinance, Lacey, WA.
Lacey Municipal Code; Title 16: Zoning; Chapter 16.59: Village Center Zone:
<http://www.ci.lacey.wa.us/city-government/municipal-code/zoning/village-center-zone/>
- Downtown Center Waterfront Zoning District, Riverhead, NY.
Municipal Code; Chapter 108, Article LVII: Downtown Center 2: Waterfront (DC-2) Zoning Use District:
<https://docs.google.com/gview?url=http://landuse.law.pace.edu/landuse/documents/laws/reg2/RiverheadNYDowntownCenter.doc&chrome=true>.
<http://www.findthatdoc.com/search-2028880-hDOC/download-documents-riverheadnydowntowncenter-doc.htm>.

Resource—written and web:

- Charles C. Bohl (2002), *Place-Making: Developing Town Centers, Main Streets, and Urban Villages*. Washington, DC: Urban Land Institute.
- *Project for Public Spaces*: www.pps.org; www.placemakers.org.
- Mark L. Hinshaw (2007), *True Urbanism: Living in and Near the Center*. Chicago, IL: Planners Press, American Planning Association.