

# Making a “Visible” Difference

by Edward T. McMahon

Planning commissioners are often overwhelmed by the press of routine business such as variance requests, subdivision approvals, re-zoning applications, and the like. As a result, they often have little time to think about what their communities will look like in the future.

Unfortunately, most zoning codes are proscriptive in nature. They merely try to prevent bad things from happening, without offering a vision of how things ought to be. But suppose you could do just one or two things to drastically improve the future character and appearance of your community, what would they be?

In recent years, a number of well known planners, architects, and community visionaries have recommended a few simple steps to transform a community from “Anyplace, USA” into someplace special. Let’s take a look at some of these visionary recommendations and find out where you can learn more about them.

## 1. Build to the Sidewalk

In his popular book, *City Comforts*, David Sucher illustrates how suburban-style setbacks have destroyed the fabric of many small towns and urban areas. His recommendation: “build to the sidewalk.” This would allow buildings to define and activate streets and squares as if they were outdoor rooms. According to



New homes are built close to the sidewalk in the Lakelands development outside of Washington, D.C.

Sucher, the only buildings pulled back, “freestanding,” from the street should be important civic buildings such as the City Hall, Public Library, or Courthouse.

 *Resources 1.* Changing your local codes to require “build to” rather than “set-back” lines is one measure which could dramatically transform a community. Mount Pleasant, South Carolina is one community that has taken this step.

## 2. Put the Parking Behind, Under, Above or to the Side of New Buildings

Obviously, every community needs parking, but in recent years parking lots have grown ever larger and more numerous. Countless communities are now dominated by enormous asphalt parking lots. Visually, parking lots create dead space in the community and often negatively impact economic development, urban design, and environmental goals.

One solution may be to place tougher controls on the amount of parking. Portland, Seattle, Toronto, and Boston, for example, all have capped the amount of downtown parking. However, capping the amount of parking may be infeasible in most communities so the next best thing is to draft policies, plans, and ordinances that solve the negative aesthetic and environmental impacts of parking lots. The simplest and yet most profound way to do this is to place parking lots behind, next to, under, or above new buildings — not in front of them.

 *Resources 2.*

## 3. Separate Density from Lot Size

Randall Arendt, Joel Russell, Elizabeth Brabec and other visionary planners have all demonstrated how typical large lot zoning laws and subdivision regulations are a recipe for suburban sprawl.

 *Resources 3.* Most comprehensive plans express a preference for preserving rural landscapes, small town character, and sense of place — but the typical zoning regulation gives developers the right, if

not the mandate, to turn the countryside into a sprawling suburb. Large lot zoning does little to preserve land because it typically occurs in the context of conventional zoning: uniform development over the entire landscape.

Many towns realize their zoning laws don’t work, but the typical solution of reducing densities by increasing lot size doesn’t really address the problem. In his landmark books *Rural By Design* and *Growing Greener: Putting Conservation into Local Codes*, Arendt offers a different approach — separating density from lot size.  *Resources 4*

For example, suppose your current ordinance calls for two acre minimum lot sizes. This would typically mean that a landowner with 100 acres could carve his land into 50 two acre lots. But suppose you required half of the land to be preserved as open space, while retaining the same overall density. Now you would have 50 one acre lots and 50 acres of open space. You would also avoid the political and legal problems associated with downzoning.

The “growing greener” approach advocated by Arendt and others recognizes that the character of a neighborhood or development is more important than the size of the lot. Separating density from lot size is a simple way to use the development process to protect open space. This approach would have immense impact on any community which employed it. In fact, Hamburg Township in Livingston County, Michigan has used this technique to preserve over 1,000 acres in the past seven years.

## 4. Develop Design Guidelines for New Commercial Buildings

Well known land use attorney, Joel Russell says, “Design is more important than density.” The impact of development is not simply a numbers game; it is also about having new development that



Even mini-storage facilities can be attractively designed. This new structure is in Chesterfield County, Virginia, near Richmond.

respects the character of your community.

Eighty percent of everything ever built in America has been built since the end of World War II and a lot of it is just plain junk. In particular chain stores, fast food franchises, self-storage facilities, convenience stores, and other “off the shelf” corporate buildings have created what James Howard Kunstler calls “the geography of nowhere.”

Design of a community communicates what it is. Design guidelines provide a way for communities to pay thoughtful attention to the relationship between new buildings and their architectural and environmental setting. Part of the current national opposition to development grows out of the fact that so much of it is ugly and homogenous. On the other hand, communities with design guidelines find that reinforcing their distinctive sense of place is good for both business and the quality of life. Santa Fe, New Mexico, for example, defines the bulk, height, and design of structures but imposes few restrictions on use. It is widely considered one of



Thanks to local design guidelines, this new drug store in Lancaster, Pennsylvania is oriented to the pedestrian, with parking and a drive-thru located behind, not in front of, the store.

America’s most charming and economically successful communities.

 Resources 5.

### 5. Use Incentives Not Just Regulations

Zoning by itself will almost never create a memorable community. Successful communities also use education and incentives to achieve their goals. Every community should systematically explore ways to use incentives to create a more livable and beautiful environment. For example, Everett, Washington, has waived property taxes on new downtown housing in a ten year plan to revitalize its downtown. Many communities have zoning that precludes downtown housing — but even a zoning change won’t necessarily produce the desired result, without an incentive.

Cities and towns also need to explore creative ways to improve the development process. Tax incentives, expedited permit review, relaxed parking standards, and free design assistance are just a few of the dozens of things that can encourage high quality development. Charlottesville, Virginia, for example, relaxes parking standards to encourage development in downtown and in neighborhood commercial areas. San Antonio, Texas, offers tax abatements to property owners who rehabilitate historic buildings. Staunton, Virginia, provides free design assistance to property owners who restore the facades of downtown buildings. Reno, Nevada, allows larger on-premise signs for businesses that agree to remove existing billboards (i.e., off-premise signs) on the same property.

As I look around, I often see that successful communities have used a few simple, yet powerful ideas to effect a visible difference in the landscape. Planning commissioners can and should be at the fore of promoting better design in their cities and towns. ♦

## Resources



Editor’s Note: Unless a phone number is noted, books

listed below can be ordered through our new online book service, at: [www.plannersweb.com](http://www.plannersweb.com)

1. David Sucher, *City Comforts: How to Build an Urban Village* (City Comforts Press, 1995).
2. A good resource on parking design is Tom Smith’s *The Aesthetics of Parking* (APA PAS Report #411, 312-786-6344).
3. See, e.g., Randall Arendt, “Open Space Zoning: What It Is & Why It Works,” *PCJ* #5, July/Aug. 1992.
4. Randall Arendt, *Rural by Design* (APA, 1994), and *Growing Greener* (Island Press, 1999). Some of the central points from Arendt’s *Growing Greener* were included in an article by the same name in *PCJ* #33, Winter 1999.
5. Two excellent books dealing with community design are Adele Fleet Bacon’s *Designing the City: A Guide for Advocates and Public Officials* (Island Press, 1995) and Ronald Lee Fleming’s *Saving Face: How Corporate Franchise Design Can Respect Community Identity* (APA PAS Report #452, 312-786-6344).

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