

# A “Community Character” Inventory

by Wendy Grey, AICP

An important responsibility of planning commissioners and staff is to enhance their community’s character by strengthening its positive attributes and modifying negative ones. These efforts can increase the sense of pride and belonging people have, while making your community a more desirable place to live and work – boosting economic development efforts.

Many people bemoan the increasing homogeneity of communities. If, however, you look beyond the commercial strips and interstate interchanges, you will find that each community has its own identifiable character. It is the result of the needs, wants, and abilities of the people who live there and the physical attributes of the place.

The groundwork for strengthening the character of your community lies in a solid understanding of what you currently have. Your community’s natural and built environment shapes its character.

While I’ll be focusing on the “place” rather than the “people,” these two components are deeply intertwined.<sup>1</sup> The kind of work people do, the ethnicity and age structure of the population, and your community’s economic base are just a few of the factors that influence the physical environment. Conversely, climate, topography, and the arrangement of land uses influence people’s daily lives and can either attract people to an area or discourage them from coming.

This column offers a range of ideas

on how to inventory the physical character of your community and assess needs and opportunities. The inventory process described below is typically done as part of a much broader comprehensive planning process – and should provide information and insights of value in the preparation of your plan.

DESPITE THE CRITICAL  
ROLE OF INFRASTRUCTURE,  
IT IS OFTEN NEGLECTED  
IN COMMUNITY PLANNING  
AND DESIGN.

As you read the article, please keep in mind the following:

- Some of the components of a “typical” inventory that I’ll be discussing may not apply to your community. Think of the inventory below as a template that you will modify to be sure that the characteristics and places your community values will be included in your analysis.

- Your community may be small enough in size and scale that conducting a complete assessment is feasible. In other places, it may be more practical to inventory just a part of your community.

## Conducting Your Inventory

Community character is not monolithic or uniform. The answers to the questions posed below may differ depending on which part of your community you are studying. Mid-20th century subdivisions will have different attributes than in-town neighborhoods developed 100 years earlier. A master planned community will differ from a part of town that has developed more incrementally. You may wish to organize your inventory by district characteristics – the type of activity (e.g., commercial or institutional); the main transportation

mode (pedestrian or automobile); or by the primary user group (e.g., students, families, or tourists).

In preparing the inventory, involve individuals with a variety of perspectives, especially those who may experience your community in different ways – for example, seniors, children, visitors, and workers who commute from other areas.

## Documenting Your Inventory

A visual record is essential. You cannot evaluate community character by simply looking at a set of land use maps, although such maps can be a good base document for recording your data.

Keep in mind that even if you are very familiar with an area, there may well be features that you do not consciously notice. Yet these features may affect your perception of the area. That is where photos or videos can be very helpful. Aerial maps are available online from Bing or Google and can give your analysis a “fifth dimension.”<sup>2</sup>

## What to Inventory

Now let’s discuss what might be covered in an inventory of community character. Listed below are key physical elements that influence community character, with some ideas of what to look for and an explanation of why these elements are important. Remember, this inventory is a template for you to expand and modify as appropriate.

### 1. The Natural Environment

- What is the climate like – is it often rainy, or hot and dry?
- What are the soils like and what impact does that have on development?
- Is the land hilly, mountainous, or flat?
- Are native flora and fauna thriving or threatened?
- What is the quality of surface and/or groundwater?

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<sup>1</sup> For a good look at the “people” side of community character, see Jim Segedy and Lisa Hollingsworth Segedy’s article, “This Plan’s for You” in *PCJ* #71 (Summer 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Barbara Sweet who, in reviewing a draft of this article, highlighted the value of aerial maps. Editor’s Note: we invite all our readers to review drafts of *PCJ* articles. For information on this, go to: [www.plannersweb.com/review-articles.html](http://www.plannersweb.com/review-articles.html).

## A Community Character Inventory

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Why is your community's natural environment important? Features such as hills, native trees, rivers, and lakes are key elements of a community's character.

Protecting these features in the site planning process and as part of public works projects can reinforce the identity of your community. For example, buildings can be designed to accommodate significant slopes without excessive grading. Low impact development techniques can reduce the amount of natural area that is disturbed. The use of native vegetation in landscaping can provide habitat for local wildlife.

### Editor's Note

## Changing Standards

PCJ transportation planning columnist Hannah Twaddell has reported that there's at least the beginnings of a change in roadway standards, providing local governments with the ability to better take community character and a roadway's context into account. I'd encourage you to take a look at her "Fitting Roadways to Community Needs: A Look at the Urban Thoroughfares Report," published in our Summer 2007 issue. Twaddell discusses a report prepared by the Institute of Transportation Engineers and the Congress for the New Urbanism (with funding from the Federal Highway Administration and the EPA). As she notes:

"The product of five years of hard work, the report provides a much needed approach to integrating the transportation objectives of roadways with design considerations that take into account the surrounding built environment and pedestrian needs. The goal: to create vibrant, healthy, and walkable urban communities. ... [it] focuses on planning for integrated, walkable streets in four context zones: suburban, general urban, urban center, and urban core."

We're making Twaddell's article available to download at no cost; go to: [www.plannersweb.com/twaddell67.pdf](http://www.plannersweb.com/twaddell67.pdf)

## 2. The Built Environment

- Do buildings and site design work together to make users feel safe and comfortable?
- Do adjacent developments relate to each other? Is there a sense of connectivity or is each development an isolated entity?
- What kind of landscaping is required and how does it affect the image of the community?
- Is there a distinct building design that reflects your community's character?

Why is the built environment important? Because it strongly influences our interactions with each other and with nature. One example: siting buildings so they relate to each other can convey a sense of orderliness that helps people navigate their surroundings, particularly in automobile oriented districts. Another example: incorporating balconies and awnings in pedestrian oriented districts keep people out of the heat or rain.

The built environment also tells us something about the past. What are the historically significant buildings in your community? Are they set in a complementary context so they can be appreciated or does nearby development detract from their presence?

Enhancing community character doesn't mean being locked into the past. "Character" should not be equated with being quaint or requiring development to look old. Having said that, a community's character is shaped by its history. Buildings and the layout of the community reflect the period in which development occurred and contribute to your community's sense of place and should be analyzed as part of your inventory.

## 3. Infrastructure

- What do your major roads look like? What kind of signage is allowed? Are the roads landscaped?
- How are pedestrians and cyclists accommodated in the transportation system?
- Are electric lines buried? If they are aboveground, are they located along the right-of-way or set behind buildings?
- Are stormwater ponds fenced off or



THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT



INFRASTRUCTURE

designed to be integrated into the open space of developments?

Why is consideration of your community's infrastructure important? Infrastructure provides the basic services needed to support your community's quality of life. Despite the critical role of infrastructure, it is often neglected in community planning and design.

It can be very difficult to "localize" infrastructure design to enhance your community's character. For example, electric utility corporations (and even municipal utilities) can be resistant to putting lines underground. Yet undergrounding utilities can dramatically

3 See, for example, Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder* (Algonquin Books, 2008).

4 See, for example, William Whyte's *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (The Project for Public Spaces, 2001) and Ray Oldenburg's *The Great Good Place* (Da Capo Press, 3rd edition, 1999)



THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT



PUBLIC SPACES

Why are public spaces important? Public spaces are where people in the community can gather and interact. They may be active recreational sites, such as ballfields or swimming pools, or passive areas, such as courthouse squares and nature preserves. There is substantial literature on the benefits of experiencing nature, especially for young children.<sup>3</sup> The benefits of common places where people can meet and interact have also been documented.<sup>4</sup> Providing places where people from various parts of town can enjoy a common experience helps build community bonds.

In this part of the inventory, you can also document places that have special meaning to the community – places where annual events take place or places with special historic significance. Some of these places may not actually be publicly owned, but they are an important part of your community's civic identity.

#### Before You Finish, Step Back

Whether you look at all the districts in your community, or just a few, before you finish the inventory, take the time to step back from the various pieces and consider the overall pattern of development:

- Identify the edge of town and determine if it coincides with political jurisdictions. Maybe there is no discernable edge, just a long continual strip of development.
- Determine whether development is generally compact or diffuse.
- Consider whether the different areas of your community are connected, either physically or in appearance, or whether they have little in common.

This look at the big picture will help you see patterns of development in your community. It will provide a framework for thinking about how the different districts can work together.

#### Moving Forward

Once the inventory is done, you will begin to work with members of the community to determine the most and least desirable features of your community and how the community can improve its character. Remember that, as with any

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planning process, regular evaluations are necessary. Your community will evolve over time. Things that were once critical become less important as demographics and technology change. So, the assessment of your community character is an ongoing process.

#### SUMMING UP

As a planning commissioner, you can play a key role in strengthening the image and character of your community. This can yield benefits not just to residents, but also to the local economy. ♦

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improve the character of a neighborhood, or of a commercial corridor.

Traffic engineers at the local and state level typically rely on nationally recognized road design standards. While it may not be possible to make major changes to the infrastructure in your community, by presenting authorities with a comprehensive description of your community's character and your desire to improve it, you may be able to initiate incremental changes. *Editor's Note, Changing Standards.*

#### 4. Public Spaces

- Do public spaces relate to the needs of your residents and visitors?
- Are they designed to feel safe?
- Are they designed to be interesting?
- Are there sitting areas, drinking water, and restrooms?
- Are there places with special meaning to the community?