A Question of Scale

by Beth Humstone

Years of sprawl produced communities where land was consumed at a much higher rate than the growth in population.[1] Rather than expand up, out back, or to the side, developers often abandoned urban areas for greenfields where they could start from scratch. Commerce transitioned from multi-story buildings on Main Street to one-story stores and offices surrounded by large fields of parking. Spacious industrial parks cropped up with sites for widely separated buildings, each consuming only a small portion of the lot.

Families migrated farther and farther afield looking for more land and cheaper land on which to have a home. Between 1970 and 2007 the median size of a new single-family home grew by 64 percent (from 1,385 square feet to 2,277 square feet) even while household size declined.[2]

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This cul-de-sac serving a small subdivision is wider than the state highway it connects to.

A SMALLER SCALE OF DEVELOPMENT IS POSSIBLE AND APPROPRIATE IN THIS TIME OF SCARCE RESOURCES AND SHIFTING DEMAND.

Streets followed the trend and soon many new subdivisions had roads wide enough for two fire engines to pass each other between two lanes of parking.

These patterns are not just the result of consumer preferences or business templates. Zoning and subdivision regulations often mandated large lots, generous setbacks, wide residential streets, and plenty of parking.

After decades of wide streets, big homes, large yards, and acres of surface parking and big box stores, development may finally be trimming down. The rate of growth in developed land moderated to just a few percentages more than the rate of growth in population between 2002 and 2007.[3] The median size of a new single-family home declined by 6 percent from its peak in 2007 to 2,135 square feet in 2009.[4] And according to the American Housing Survey, yards are getting smaller too. The median size lot for a single-family home is down in 2009 to .26 acres from. 36 acres in 2007.[5]

Many communities have reduced their street width requirements. The State of Oregon has even developed guidelines for "skinny streets."[6]

Some big box retailers are also rethinking their standard formats and looking into smaller, more neighborhood-oriented stores.

Why are a growing number of families, communities, and businesses now examining smaller options? One reason is that demographics have shifted. Today a little over 20 percent of all households consist of two parents with children under 18. As our population ages and households diversify, people are demanding alternatives to single-family homes on large lots out in the countryside – and more are looking at urban neighborhoods, transit-oriented development, or new village-scale projects. Communities are increasingly responding to this demand.

How does a planner determine what scale meets the growing interest in more cohesive, walkable neighborhoods and commercial districts? The answer will vary from place to place. But to begin, look at what seems to work. Where in your community (or in nearby communities) can one see people in residential or commercial areas walking along the streets, stopping to talk, or playing together? What are the characteristics of these places? Look at the distance between buildings, setbacks from roads, building heights and number of stories, building square footage, and street widths.

In St. Albans, Vermont, two neighborhoods located side-by-side reflect two very different patterns of residential development. In one neighborhood (lower left photo on next page), the street is relatively narrow (22 feet wide) and bordered by sidewalks and tree belts. In the other neighborhood the street is

1 Between 1982 and 2002, population in the United States grew by 24.5 percent [U.S. Census Bureau] while developed land increased by 46.6 percent, almost double the rate of population growth. U.S. Department of Agriculture, *2007 National Resources Inventory*.

2 U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Construction Reports,* C-25 (1998) and *Characteristics of New Single-Family Homes Completed* (2009). Current data available at: www.census.gov/const/www/charindex.html.

3 Population growth from U.S. Census of Population. Growth in developed land from U.S. Department of Agriculture, *2007 National Resources Inventory*.

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Aerial photo above shows two adjoining neighborhoods in St. Albans Town, Vermont (seen in the lower half of photo) and St. Albans City (seen above the newer subdivision). Below, narrower setbacks in the older neighborhood, much wider ones in the newer neighborhood.

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wider (32 feet) and there are no sidewalks or tree belts. Houses in this development are also set further back from the street, and have lots two to three times larger than the first neighborhood. While these differences may not seem dramatic, one can see from this illustration how a change in scale can produce two very different places.

As big box and other large-format stores look for sites in older commercial areas, planners must determine if and how they will fit. First, an appropriate size for these buildings measured by floor area, height, and footprint must be determined. Among the factors to consider will be the existing building pattern and the availability of vacant or underutilized space. A two-story, 150,000 square foot department store with an adjacent multi-level parking garage was located in downtown Burlington, Vermont. A one-story flat building would have been inappropriate in this compact, diverse retailing center. The parking garage was scaled down due to the accessibility of the store by bus and foot.

For years determining appropriate street widths has been a concern of emergency service personnel, transportation engineers, town planners, and residents. After much dialogue with stakeholders, an Oregon coalition came up with three potential scenarios for street widths – (1) 28-foot wide with parking on both sides of the street, (2) 24-foot wide with parking on one side only, and (3) 20-foot wide with no on-street parking.[7] The Oregon guidelines illustrate that narrower streets can help to slow traffic and create a more hospitable public space, while meeting safety and access requirements and saving money.

Many communities, builders, homeowners, and developers are showing that a smaller scale of development is possible and appropriate in this time of scarce resources and shifting demand. ◆

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Human Scale vs. Automobile Scale

Planners often consider two predominant types of scales of development: (1) human scale, and (2) automobile scale.

To understand the difference, think of how a person perceives and interacts with the places around him as a pedestrian and as a driver of a car. As a pedestrian a person is able to perceive many different events, features, or images – both horizontally and vertically – within a short distance. Because passage through space is more rapid in a car, to a driver details are less legible and the view is predominantly horizontal. Thus, large-scale, low, flat, and unadorned buildings with big signs are common in auto-oriented developments. However, such places would be unappealing and even alienating in a pedestrian environment.

4 See footnote 2.

5 U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development, *American Housing Survey: 2009 and 2007*.

6 Oregon's *Neighborhood Street Design Guidelines: An Oregon Guide for Reducing Street Widths* (November 2000) was signed by Oregon Department of Transportation, Fire Chiefs Association, Chiefs of Police Association and the state chapter of the American Planning Association among others. Available online at: www.oregon.gov/LCD/docs/publications/neighstreet.pdf.

7 *Ibid.*