

Controlling Strip Development

by Ross A. Moldoff, AICP

The effect of (commercial strips) is to create “roadtowns” instead of centers — to make a row of buildings ... with no beginning and no ending, instead of a group of buildings around a common center or purpose. Such development does not meet the conception of a true town or unit of society; it is not a town, it is merely a linear spreading of humanity.

— Benton MacKaye, 1930, “The Townless Highway,” *The New Republic*, Vol. 62

One of the most pressing planning problems throughout the country is commercial strip development. Strip development is contrary to the basic elements of good planning: it consumes open space and depletes natural resources, impedes pedestrian and non-motorized traffic, grows outward from the limits of existing development, and ruins any sense of place. Yet more strips are created every year and many communities seem to have no idea how to stop or control them.

The experience in Salem, New Hampshire (population 28,000), where I work, is illustrative of what has happened in many places. The town was faced with burgeoning population growth in the 1950s and 60s due to the completion of Interstate 93, which linked Salem to Boston just 32 miles to the south. Community leaders sought to increase tax revenue to pay for the services demanded by new residents.

The Commercial Strip

A linear pattern of retail businesses along a major roadway, characterized by box-like buildings with prominent parking lots visible from the roadway, multiple driveways, large signs, and a dependency on automobiles for access and circulation.

They zoned a six mile long strip of mostly flat farmland along Route 28, our main arterial, for just about any kind of commercial use.

Over the next 40 years, the town got exactly what it zoned. The corridor is now virtually full of retail stores. While property tax revenue from these businesses grew substantially over the years, so did the cost of providing police and fire protection, and dealing with traffic congestion problems.

What specific steps can be taken to control or ameliorate this type of strip development? In the following pages, you’ll find an overview of some approaches to consider — along with photos of some good and bad examples of commercial corridors.

1. Use Zoning to Prevent Future Linear Strips

Many communities, in their comprehensive plans, include goals related to concentrating development in nodes or clusters and reducing the amount of auto usage. Yet local zoning regulations still usually allow for retail development to be strung out in a linear pattern (often miles long) along major road corridors — a pattern at odds with plan goals.

Zoning is perhaps the single most important tool communities use to shape the pattern of development. Zoning can either facilitate commercial strips or prevent them from happening (or expanding). An alternative to a strip pattern, which still meets the demand for retail space, is to designate retail clusters or nodes around major intersections and



Along Route 28 in Salem, New Hampshire.

limit retail uses on the rest of the corridor. These nodes can be planned to integrate other commercial, office, and even housing development, along with retail uses. Again, zoning can either enable or prevent this from happening. A good example of such development is Mizner Park in Boca Raton, Florida, where a new downtown center was created along U.S. Route 1, with retail stores and restaurants at street level, and office space and residential condominiums above the stores.

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Mizner Park’s interior streets are just a block off busy U.S. Route 1.



Conway, Arkansas

Conway, Arkansas, is a small but rapidly growing city (population, 43,000) north of Little Rock. Conway has adopted overlay zoning to help improve the quality of commercial strip development. According to Planning Director William Polk, the two requirements that have had the greatest impact have been for landscaping along the roadway and limitations on signage. The landscaping requirements include a landscaped strip from 15 feet to 20 feet in width along the road and the construction of a three foot high berm in that landscaped strip. The signs must be no more than eight feet in height and 64 square feet in area. As Polk notes, “both of these requirements have added markedly to the visual quality of the corridors.”

Another important element in improving Conway’s corridors is a requirement that curb cuts be separated from each other by a distance of either 200 or 300 feet (depending upon the specific corridor.) As Polk observes, “We anticipate that this will be very helpful in reducing traffic congestion and in encouraging cross access easements [providing] the opportunity for traffic to move from facility to facility without having to come out on the major roadway.”

Patience is often necessary when implementing regulations to improve commercial corridors. In Conway, for example, a significant number of projects along the corridors were already underway and given exemptions (except from the sign requirements). As a result, the true impact of the regulations won’t be felt for several years.



WILLIAM POLK

A portion of a berm required under Conway’s commercial corridor zoning regulations. In contrast, note that the parking lot for the older development just visible on the far side of the roadway (built prior to the corridor zoning) directly abuts the roadway.

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2. Adopt Architectural Standards

“The distinguishing characteristic of suburban strips in the minds of most Americans is their undisguised ugliness.”

– Michael Beyard & Michael Pawlukiewicz, *Ten Principles for Reinventing America’s Suburban Strips (Urban Land Institute 2001)*

Commercial corridors – whether taking a linear form or a more compact pattern – do not have to be eyesores. Nothing does more to ruin a community’s sense of place and character than a string of ugly, box-like buildings.

If you want to prevent the bland look of big-box development, you should consider adopting regulations (or guidelines) on building design and architecture. In developing these, it can be quite helpful to compile photographs of attractive local buildings which illustrate what the community hopes to see in new projects. Typical design criteria call for avoiding long unbroken expanses of walls and flat roofs, using or avoiding certain types of material for wall surfaces, and utilizing other techniques like facade divisions and color changes to create interesting building designs. *For more on this, see Ilene Watson’s “An Introduction to Design Guidelines,” in PCJ #41 (Winter 2001).*

Having a design review advisory committee (or similar advisory body) can also be helpful in reviewing design details and working with project applicants – and in providing recommendations to the planning commission.

3. Use Plantings to Soften the View

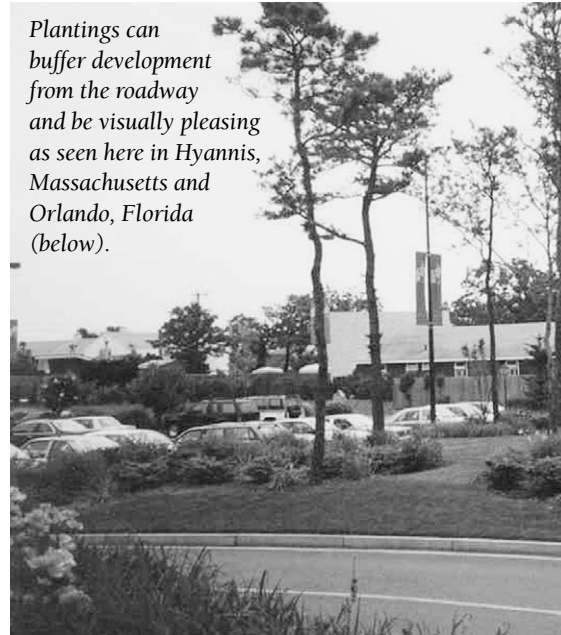
“Trees are not frills or cosmetic additions. They are basic infrastructure and a major factor in contributing to community pride, quality of life, and economic development.”

– Edward McMahon, “Green Infrastructure,” *PCJ #37 (Winter 2000).*

One of the most objectionable aspects of strip development is the “sea of pavement” effect, where open fields and woodlands are converted to asphalt parking lots. A good landscaping plan can mitigate some of this problem. The

best possible scenario is to save existing vegetation, especially in front of a site, though this is rarely done.

Many communities also have landscaping requirements as part of their zoning ordinance or site plan regulations. These requirements typically specify the minimum size, type, and location of trees and shrubs, the need for planting islands and screening of parking



Plantings can buffer development from the roadway and be visually pleasing as seen here in Hyannis, Massachusetts and Orlando, Florida (below).



lots from streets, and a host of other criteria. The most sophisticated regulations may even contain detailed drawings and diagrams to guide applicants. Another option is to require landscape plans to be reviewed by a landscape architect working for the planning commission. This can be especially useful in smaller communities with limited planning staff.

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Causes of Strip Development

Population – A basic principle of real estate is that retail development follows population growth. As more residents move into an area, they typically want more goods and services to be available closer to their homes. The market response has been commercial development along major arterials, since they provide good accessibility to large numbers of people.

Conventional Zoning – Look at the zoning map for most communities with a heavily traveled road and you will typically see a corridor reserved for retail stores and businesses. This reflects the fact that local leaders usually believe that the highest and best use for land along busy roadways is for retail stores and shopping centers. Other typical zoning regulations like the separation of residential from commercial zoning districts, minimum lot size, lot coverage, building setbacks, and excessive parking requirements also tend to produce the classic strip development pattern.

Tax System – In many communities, the quest for tax revenue is one of the driving forces in land use decisions. The conventional wisdom holds that the tax revenue from commercial development is needed to offset the higher costs of residential development. While commercial developments may well pay more in tax revenue than they cost a town in services, one study has found that local property tax rates are, on average, higher in towns that have the most commercial activity.

See, e.g., *Community Choices: Thinking Through Land Conservation, Development, and Property Taxes in Massachusetts* (The Trust for Public Land, 1998); available at: <www.tpl.org>.

Strip Development Policies

More and more communities are adopting policies designed to better deal with commercial strip development. Just a few are highlighted below:

Multnomah County, Oregon's land use policies focus on prohibiting the expansion of existing strips or the creation of new ones. For existing strips, the policy is: "When approval is required by the County

within an established strip development, it will: require existing strip commercial access points to be consolidated; and require safe pedestrian circulation, off-street parking, loading and storage, lighting, signs, and landscape treatment to minimize adverse impacts of the strip commercial pattern."

Saisbury, North Carolina's commercial development policies include: "Commercial development shall be encouraged to occur in clusters or planned shopping centers to minimize the proliferation of 'retail strip' locations ... Highway oriented commercial uses shall be clustered along segments of arterial streets and contain land uses which are mutually compatible and reinforcing in use and design; they should be designed ... to minimize signage, access points, and excessive lengths of commercial strip development."

Signal Hill, California's commercial corridor specific plan includes the goal of achieving "a cohesiveness in building design on and among parcels ... located along the same major surface street corridors."

Auburn, Alabama's "Village Centers Strategic Development Concept" is intended to change the pattern of the City's future growth: "Rather than continuing single-use retail sprawl along major automobile corridors, Auburn will focus development upon a compact pattern of Village and Neighborhood Centers supported by adjacent residential neighborhoods. ... The City of Villages concept encourages the development of compact centers that focus and complement the surrounding neighborhoods – centers that are supported by existing and planned road networks constructed in response to traffic demands of both the auto and the pedestrian. ... [a] strip pattern is anti-village, for it clogs the primary street system and separates rather than centers people on their neighborhoods and the community at large."

As a result, Auburn's development policies include: "Encourage future land development to be located in centralized, compact patterns rather than decentralized, sprawled patterns. Discourage strip commercial activities along major traffic arteries unless specifically designated in the Comprehensive Plan."



Environmental Impacts

The environmental impacts of strip development can be significant:

- Low intensity commercial development tends to result in greater loss of agricultural land, open space, and wildlife habitat and more damage to sensitive natural resources like wetlands and floodplains than other forms of development.
- Large impervious parking lots and building rooftops can increase the volume of runoff (and amount of pollutants) entering water bodies, causing soil erosion. Altered stream flow and watershed hydrology can also lead to loss of groundwater recharge and flooding. For example, it is estimated that a one-acre parking lot produces sixteen times greater runoff volume than an undeveloped meadow.
- Traffic congestion along retail corridors increases the emission of air pollutants and greenhouse gases.
- For more information, see: "Our Built and Natural Environment" U.S. EPA, 2001, available at: www.smartgrowth.org/library/built.html.

Housing & Commercial Corridors

Commercial corridors can serve as areas for higher density residential housing. A recent report by the Urban Land Institute advocates this: "Pulses of development density along the suburban strip will ... pump new life into suburban strips. Use key intersections or major transit stops to create cores of development. ... Plan and zone higher densities in these nodes of development." *Ten Principles for Reinventing America's Suburban Strips*, by Michael D. Beyard & Michael Pawlukiewicz (2001).

Two practical considerations reinforce this idea. First, many communities struggle to find ways of supporting local bus service. Bus routes often run along commercial corridors. Putting housing close to bus lines can help increase ridership. Second, in small and mid-sized cities that are already substantially built out, it can be hard to add higher density housing in existing residential neighborhoods. Major road corridors can provide a less controversial location for developing new housing.



Large sign clutter versus a smaller, but more effective, grouping of signs. Both are along arterial roads (Salem, New Hampshire on the left; South Burlington, Vermont on the right).



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4. Restrict Signage

"While signs are a form of expression protected by the Free Speech Clause, they pose distinctive problems that are subject to municipalities' police powers. Unlike oral speech, signs take up space and may obstruct views, distract motorists, displace alternative uses for land, and pose other problems that legitimately call for regulation. It is common ground that governments may regulate the physical characteristics of signs. ..."

— U.S. Supreme Court in *City of Ladue v. Gilleo*, 1994

Signage is another factor that influences the appearance of commercial corridors. Tall, large, or poorly designed signs can create as much visual pollution as bare parking lots or ugly buildings. The key to good sign regulations is to adequately restrict the number, size, height, and location of freestanding and wall signs. Ordinances that specify acceptable and unacceptable types and locations of signs are becoming more common. Also, the use of incentives for smaller signs (such as reduced setback requirements) is gaining acceptance, especially on well-established strips. *For more on this, see Ed McMahon's "Sign Regulation," in PCJ #25 (Winter 1997).*

5. Deal with Traffic Congestion & Pedestrian Access

Many citizens who live in a community with a commercial strip hate the traffic congestion it causes more than

anything else. While traffic congestion is a common result of extensive retail development, there are several strategies that can be used to address this problem. Local traffic regulations and access management standards can be adopted to minimize curb cuts and require shared driveways and parking lot connections. Applicants can also be required to construct road improvements to offset their traffic impacts, or pay impact fees for the same purpose.

Pedestrian and bicycle traffic is often not considered when communities approve retail projects. But providing a safe environment for pedestrians and bicyclists can reduce vehicle trips and make a strip more attractive to shoppers. Simple steps such as requiring sidewalks and crosswalks, constructing bike paths, and linking driveways to provide cross-access can promote alternative modes of transportation, and better connect commercial corridors with nearby neighborhoods, major employers, and even downtown areas.

Corridor traffic studies are useful in identifying short and long-term solutions to traffic problems, as well as pedestrian and bicyclists' needs. It is common practice in many communities to require all major development projects to prepare traffic studies which evaluate their impact on the local road network and then have these studies reviewed, at the applicant's expense, by an independent consultant.



Improvements to commercial corridors can facilitate transit access and provide for pedestrian connections, as in South Burlington, Vermont (note also the absence of overhead utilities).



6. Consider a Comprehensive Ordinance for the Corridor


Some communities are taking a coordinated approach to control strip development through the adoption of special ordinances for entire road corridors. While these ordinances address typical zoning concerns such as permitted uses, lot sizes, and building setbacks, they also deal with architecture, landscaping, signage, parking, and traffic issues unique to the corridor.¹

For example, Gwinnett County, northeast of Atlanta, wanted to enhance livability around the Mall of Georgia and the adjacent Highway 20 corridor. One key to this has been the adoption of the Mall of Georgia Overlay District.

The overlay district is designed to achieve a unified visual quality in landscaping, architecture, and signage, and to promote pedestrian and transit use. Specific regulations in the overlay district deal with inter-parcel access, sidewalks, street lighting, landscaping and buffers, parking lot layout, and signage. The design of new buildings must comply with guidelines on building facades, materials, colors, roofs, and other design features.

According to Steven Logan, Director of the Gwinnett County Planning

¹ Some good examples are the Indiantown Road Overlay District in Jupiter, Florida <www.jupiter.fl.us>; the West Colfax Avenue Overlay District in Lakewood, Colorado <www.lakewood.org> (then search for “West Colfax Overlay”); and the Mall of Georgia Overlay District in Gwinnett County, Georgia <www.co.gwinnett.ga.us>.

Division, consideration is being given to adopting similar regulations for other corridors in the county, and to expanding the uses allowed in corridors to include multifamily development. See also  Conway, Arkansas, p.2.

SUMMING UP:

Strip development continues to proliferate throughout the country. Just about every town – big or small, rich or poor – has a major road corridor with characteristics of a strip. However, this does not mean planners should throw up their hands and do nothing. Just as with other parts of our built environment, planners and planning commissioners can work to ensure higher quality development. While it takes persistence, the result can be commercial corridors that are visually attractive, environmentally sound, and compatible with good traffic flow and safe pedestrian access. ♦

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Resources



A number of publications are available to help in the battle to prevent or control strip development:

- The *Planning Commissioners Journal* has published several articles touching on different aspects of strip development, including: “Access Management: A Guide for Roadway Corridors,” by Elizabeth Humstone & Julie Campoli (PCJ #29, Winter 1998); “An Introduction to Design Guidelines,” by Ilene Watson (PCJ #41, Winter 2001); “Gateways: Creating Civic Identity,” by Suzanne Sutro Rhees (PCJ #21, Winter 1996); and “All Development is Not Created Equal,” by Ed McMahon (PCJ #32, Fall 1998). These articles can be ordered and downloaded by going to: <www.plannersweb.com>.

- The American Planning Association has several publications which address strip development, including *Saving Face: How Corporate Franchise Design Can Respect Community Identity*, by Ronald Lee Fleming (Planning Advisory Service Report #452, 1994), *Designing Urban Corridors*, by Kirk Bishop (APA Planning Service Report #418, 1989), and *The Aesthetics of Parking* (Planning Advisory Service Report #411, 1988). See <www.planning.org> for ordering information, or call 312-955-9100.

- The Urban Land Institute's *Ten Principles for Reinventing America's Suburban Strips*, by Michael Beyard & Michael Pawlukiewicz (2001), available to order at: <www.uli.org>.

- The Cape Cod Commission in Massachusetts has an excellent publication, *Designing the Future to Honor the Past: Design Guidelines for Cape Cod*, with tips, illustrations, and photographs. It covers architecture, landscaping, signage, and a host of other site design issues, as well as case studies and a chapter on implementation. It can be ordered at: <www.capecodcommission.org>.