

# Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design in Sarasota, Florida

by Sherry Plaster Carter, AICP,  
and Stanley L. Carter

In many communities, dealing with crime is still considered the exclusive domain of law enforcement. Police and sheriff's departments operate independently of other governmental or community efforts. Likewise planning departments often fail to invite the participation of law enforcement into the planning process. This "territorial" division has created an unfortunate bureaucratic obstacle to the successful rebuilding of communities.

The City of Sarasota challenged this old way of doing business and proved that prevention efforts can be enhanced by having planning and law enforcement work together, instead of apart. The City's "North Trail" provided the testing ground.

## NORTH TRAIL SECTOR STUDY


The North Trail area is Sarasota's gateway to the central business district and Gulf Coast beaches. Bisected by U.S. Route 41, the "Trail" was characterized by numerous "mom and pop" motels and other deteriorating structures built prior to the 1960s. Over the years, few of the structures had been improved, and many had been poorly maintained.

The southern half of the "North Trail" had experienced the greatest degree of economic decline. Characterized by an ongoing and highly visible prostitution problem, crime and the *perception* of crime were major issues identified by the public, and confirmed by a crime analysis. Left unchecked, the commercial area and surrounding neighborhoods seemed destined to continue their downward spiral with all of the attendant social, economic and criminal consequences.

Planning staff had initiated the North Trail Sector Study as part of budgeted work programs mandated by the City's

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Comprehensive Growth Management Plan. Staff quickly determined that redevelopment issues could not be tackled until an effort had been made to moderate the incidence and frequency of crime.

At the same time, a local community association, Gateway 2000, had begun a long term effort to improve the appearance and vitality of the "gateway" into the heart of the City. Planning staff requested assistance from the Police Department and initiated an ongoing liaison with Gateway 2000. The initial planning and police discussions led to the formation of an Administrative CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) Task Force. The North Trail Sector Study served as an ideal way of testing large scale application of CPTED principles prior to city-wide implementation.  City-Wide CPTED.

## REDEVELOPMENT CONSTRAINTS

Planning staff began the study process by reviewing existing zoning regulations for the area. We found that there were several constraints to physical redevelopment. The "mom and pop" motels were on residentially zoned land. As they became obsolete in the market place they could not lawfully change to a more viable commercial use. Over three-quarters of the properties were built prior to adoption of the existing zoning code and did not meet the more restrictive densities, setbacks, drainage, parking and landscape requirements. Under the zoning code, owners with non-conforming uses could not spend in excess of 10% of the structure's assessed value on improvements within any 12 months without bringing the entire property up to code.

To make matters even worse, the widening of U.S. 41 had taken substantial frontage for additional lanes and right-of-way, leaving the commercial structures on small parcels with little front yard. The net result: these properties were literally "frozen" in time.

## LAW ENFORCEMENT INVOLVEMENT

The police department's involvement in the North Trail project began with an intense effort to combat street level prostitution and crack cocaine violations. This immediate response built tremendous public confidence in our ability to reclaim the area. It created a positive, productive and patient relationship with the public that assisted planning staff during the lengthy process of adopting new land development regulations.

Property owners were so encouraged that many "caught the fever" and began fixing up their properties. A North Trail merchants association was formed to pro-



## City-Wide CPTED

The North Trail study laid the groundwork for a city-wide CPTED program. Sarasota City Manager David Sollenberger required several capital improvement projects in the downtown area (including parks, parking lots, alley ways, street median beautification and the downtown storefront program) to be reviewed by the CPTED team organized during the North Trail study.

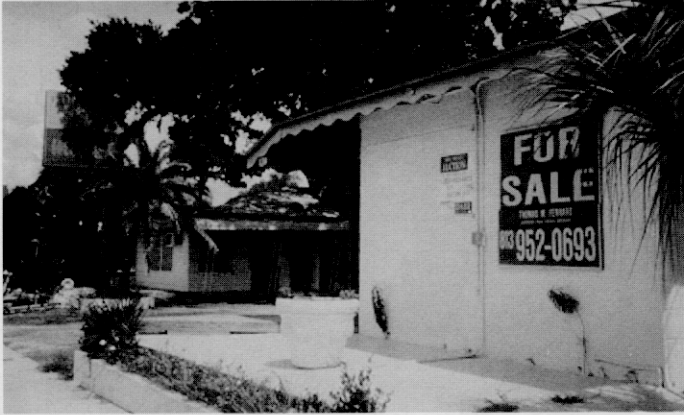
Projects were reviewed and changes made to improve visibility and pedestrian level lighting, and to use a landscape theme of low ground cover and canopy trees in parks and parking lots. Maintenance and lighting were improved in downtown alley ways. Pedestrian amenities included creating attractive places for people to sit in public areas. Pedestrian and traffic circulation patterns were reviewed for safety and convenient access. Visibility and aesthetics were enhanced in storefront improvements by adding both first and second floor windows and reducing the size and frequency of signs placed in windows.

As a result, the improvements were completed in a fashion that provided the greatest measure of public safety. Combined with accompanying private investment and the addition of foot and bicycle patrols, the downtown has had a marked decrease in crime and is becoming known as a safe place, as evidenced by an increase in day and particularly nighttime use.

### EDITOR'S NOTE:

## Security & Vandalism

Excellent guidelines on how residential developments can be better designed to address security concerns can be found in *Housing As If People Mattered*, by Clare Cooper Marcus & Wendy Sarkissian (available from The University of California Press, 1-800-822-6657). Among the topics addressed are: *penetrability* (how to make criminal access more difficult); *territoriality* (site planning techniques that give residents more control over the space adjacent to their homes); *surveillance* (how to increase opportunities for neighbors to keep an eye on nearby activities); *ambiguity* (ways of reducing "unclaimed" areas within a development); and *vandalism* (design approaches that reduce vandalism).



Example of North Trail area small motel.



Motel that has recently been redeveloped. (BOTH PHOTOS BY CITY STAFF)


mote the businesses. The City Commission (our governing body) further blessed the effort by allocating moneys to beautify the medians that run the three mile length of U.S. 41 through the North Trail district. Before any regulatory changes were made, the "Trail" had begun to improve.

### CREATION OF THE NORTH TRAIL DISTRICT

The study team concluded that a special zone district, the "NT" zone, should be created. The district would incorporate zoning standards designed to stimulate redevelopment: additional land uses would be allowed; pedestrian amenities

would be encouraged; incentives would be offered for shared parking; buffer requirements would be strengthened between commercial and residential areas; and, of critical importance, "crime prevention through environmental design" (CPTED) principles would be followed so that as the area redeveloped, it would be designed in such a way as to minimize opportunities for criminal acts. [Editor's Note: For an overview of CPTED principles see the article by Timothy Crowe on page 5 of this issue.]

### CPTED IN THE NORTH TRAIL DISTRICT

The district regulations, adopted October 5, 1992, call for a CPTED review of development (and redevelopment) projects. The regulations provide that a law enforcement officer and a trained planner or building official review proposed developments from a crime prevention perspective. Property owners must respond to each concern identified by the CPTED reviewers. Property owners are not required, however, to incorporate any of the CPTED recommendations.  "Implementing CPTED: Lessons from Sarasota", p. 9.

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## CPTED in Sarasota, Florida

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Guidelines for the review are for the purpose of assisting "... in the creation and maintenance of a built environment that decreases the opportunity for crime and increases the perception of safety."

The following excerpts from the ordinance should give you a good sense of how the City sought to integrate crime prevention principles into review of a project's design:

(a) *Provision of natural surveillance.*

(1) The placement and design of physical features to maximize visibility. This will include building orientation, windows, entrances and exits, parking lots, walkways, guard gates, landscape trees and shrubs, fences or walls, signage and any other physical obstructions.

(2) The placement of persons and/or activities to maximize surveillance possibilities.

(3) Lighting that provides for nighttime illumination of parking lots, walkways, entrances and exits.

(b) *Provision for natural access control.*

(1) The use of sidewalks, pavement, lighting and landscaping to clearly guide the public to and from entrances and exits.

(2) The use of fences, walls or land-

scaping to prevent and/or discourage public access to or from dark and/or non-monitored areas.

(c) *Provision of territorial reinforcement.*

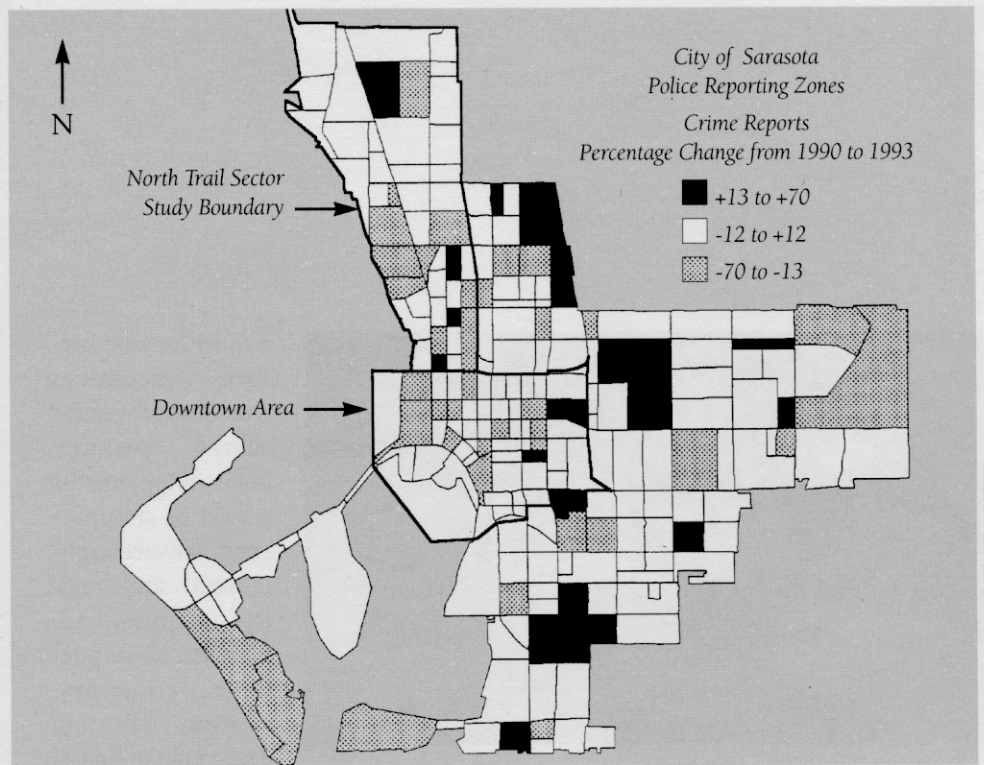
(1) The use of pavement treatments, landscaping, art, signage, screening and fences to define and outline ownership of property.

(d) *Maintenance.*

(1) The use of low-maintenance landscaping and lighting treatment to facilitate the CPTED principles of natural surveillance, natural access control and territorial reinforcement.

The North Trail District standards include other CPTED features, such as requirements for exterior lighting (for example, nighttime illumination is required for walkways, entrances, exits, etc., from 1/2 hour after sunset to 1/2 hour before sunrise) and incentives for providing balconies and patios. There is also the opportunity for an additional 10 feet in structure height, by allowing a "third floor" residential use above existing or planned commercial uses.

The NT District regulations call for



Crime reports show reduction in crime in most North Trail and Downtown zones since initiation of CPTED programs.

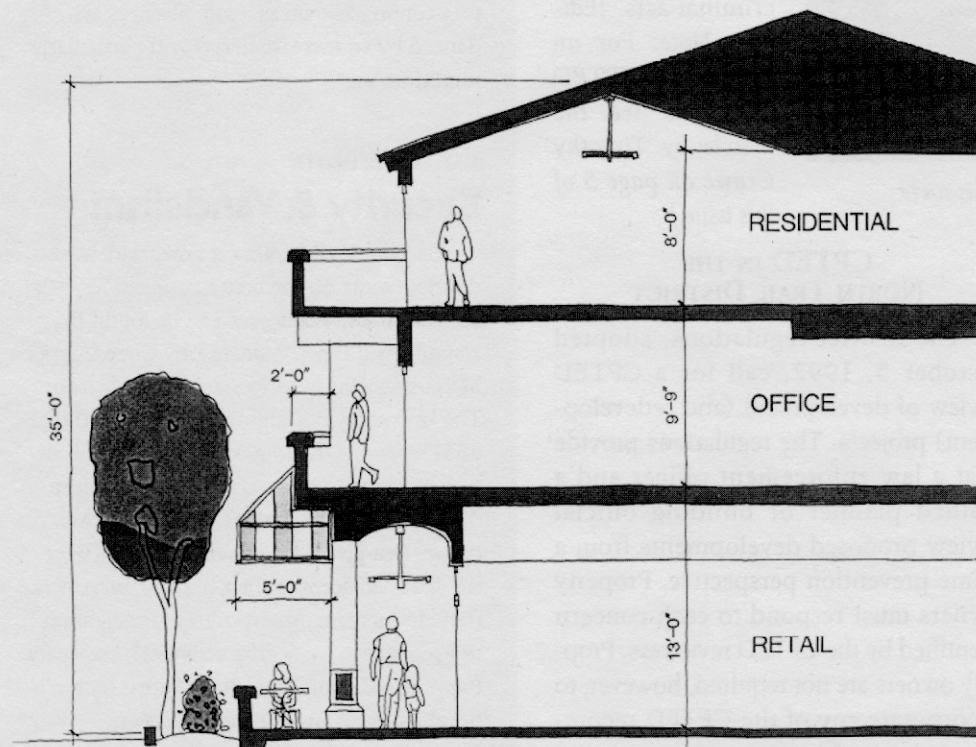


Illustration of some provisions of the North Trail District. Note the third floor residential housing

landscaping that includes canopy trees with a minimum 5 foot trunk clearance and low ground covers with a maximum height of 2 1/2 feet. Landscape designs with a clear surveillance zone from 2 1/2 to 5 feet do not provide hiding places for criminals, but do provide shade for pedestrians, an attractive ambiance for outside eating and a helpful buffer for adjacent residential uses.

### SUMMING UP:

Private funding often follows public investment. The City of Sarasota has invested substantial time and effort in improving the North Trail area. A \$600,000 North Trail median and beautification project is now under construction. Two structures, one an older motel, have been redeveloped under the new zoning standards.

Developers have shown increased interest in commercial properties along the corridor. Law enforcement sweeps and surveillance stings have helped reduced crime levels. But the most important change is the increasingly positive attitude among area residents and merchants. While assessing the results of the new zoning regulations and the growing public and private investment will require several years, it appears that the North Trail is well on the road to recovery. ♦

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## Implementing CPTED: Lessons from Sarasota

- *Establish an interdepartmental CPTED team.* Create a small group of persons who are knowledgeable and enthusiastic about their respective fields. Include planning, building and crime prevention officers. After several meetings, team members will have a better understanding of the assets and limitations of each department in the CPTED process. This understanding is critical to the creation of viable policies and actions.

- *Provide team members with CPTED training.* This is available from the National Crime Prevention Institute and the Florida Crime Prevention Training Institute, or you can contract with private trainers.

- *Require a CPTED review as part of your permitting process.* Do it early in the process to prevent additional cost and ill feelings. CPTED principles work best when they are an integral part of the design review process from the start.

- *Use the CPTED review to provide the developer with recommendations which they must respond to — not mandates which they must follow.* The fact that the regulations only require a response instead of mandating compliance has helped build a positive relationship between the review team and applicants — and has led designers to come up with creative solutions. The few “losses” from this non-mandatory approach are worth the compensating benefits.

- *Require the signatures of a trained planner or building official and a crime prevention officer on each review.* The fields of planning/building and law enforcement are not interchangeable and both are critical to creative, viable solutions. Use the entire CPTED team on large or critical projects.

- *Enlist creative input from the design field for specific solutions.* Once the architects are sold on the merits of CPTED, the program perpetuates itself in the most cost-efficient, beneficial and pleasing manner.

- *Educate your decision makers and politicians.* CPTED is a win-win program that makes everyone look good. Request that all governmental capital improvements receive a CPTED review.