

# Developing at the Edge

by Tom Daniels

Polls often show that many Americans would prefer to live in a small town or village. The slower pace, the human scale of buildings, the sense of community, and the ability to walk to shops, schools, and playgrounds are all attractive features of small town life. But small towns and villages have long faced a variety of challenges, such as the loss of downtown businesses, ugly commercial strip development, and poorly designed housing at the village edge.

In fast-growing metropolitan regions, villages are especially vulnerable to large and sudden increases in population and an overwhelming sea of development. In rural areas, village residents may be hungry for growth and increased property tax base. Adding new development within or at the edge of a village, if done well, can retain those village features that the residents cherish, reinforce a more compact development pattern that is cheaper and easier to service than sprawl, while also providing for economic growth.

## BASIC TOOLS FOR GUIDING NEW DEVELOPMENT ON THE EDGE

It is often said that if an older village were to burn down, it could not be rebuilt under today's zoning and subdivision codes. Thus, it comes as little surprise when new commercial and residential developments added at the edge of a village do not continue traditional building styles and land use patterns. This does not have to be the case.

There are several ways to promote quality development on the edge of an existing village. First, through the comprehensive plan and future land use map, village officials can maintain as much as possible the current pattern of compact development and retain a clear edge between the village and the countryside.

An especially helpful practice is an

“official map” which designates future street networks for developers to follow. The elected government body adopts the official map and village officials will not issue a building permit for any building



Aerial view of Richmond, Vermont shows the demarcation between countryside and village.



Along Bridge Street in the center of Richmond, Vermont; and farmland southwest of the village.

within the lines of any street laid out on the official map. In this way, the official map can guide the expansion of streets and the location of new development. For example, an official map designating a grid pattern with short blocks can enable a village to expand in an orderly and compact style.

A capital improvements program (CIP) is a schedule of the infrastructure a village will install or repair and how to pay for it. The CIP reflects decisions of when and where infrastructure will be provided and expanded, in particular central sewer and water service.

There should be a close tie between the zoning at the edge of the village and sewer and water service areas. The idea is to promote higher density and mixed-use development within the village, not

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## Town & Village Terminology



The terms “town” and “village” have slightly different meanings in different parts of the United States. In this article, I use the term town to mean an incorporated mixed-use settlement of 2,500 to 10,000 people. A village is smaller than a town, usually with fewer than 2,500 residents. A village may or may not be an incorporated place.

In New England, a Town (with a capital T) refers to a municipality that covers about 25,000 acres and has control over planning and zoning within its boundaries. A Town may contain one or more villages. In Mid-Atlantic states and the Midwest, Towns with a capital T are called “townships.” In Pennsylvania, incorporated towns and villages are known as “boroughs” (see footnote 1).

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extend sewer and water lines far out into the countryside. *Editor's Note: for more on the use of sewer and water extensions as a growth management tool, see "Developing a Sewer Ordinance: One Town's Experience, by Kate Lampton (PCJ #44).*

To direct commercial development on the edge of the village, zoning can limit the square footage of new commercial buildings to discourage big box stores. Instead, mixed-use development can be encouraged, by permitting a range of neighborhood-oriented retail such as small groceries and convenience stores.

Zoning can also restrict the number of curb cuts (driveways) and require setbacks with vegetation to create a green buffer between commercial businesses and the highway. Finally, a village can use design review standards to discourage (or prohibit) new buildings that are significantly dissimilar from what already exists. Design review is especially appropriate for historic villages where tourism is an important industry.

### GROWTH AREAS & BOUNDARIES

Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, is famous for its Pennsylvania Dutch heritage, Amish population, and scenic farmland. But it is also a recognized leader in managing growth. Located just 60 miles west of Philadelphia, the county



LANCASTER COUNTY PLANNING COMMISSION

The village of Mount Nebo in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Maintaining existing settlement patterns is an important goal of the County.

has 500,000 residents with an anticipated growth of 100,000 people over the next 20 years. The County Planning Commission has recognized that if this additional population were spread across the countryside, thousands of acres of prime farmland would be lost to development.

Since 1993, the County Planning Commission has worked with townships and boroughs (i.e., villages) to designate 18 "village growth boundaries."<sup>1</sup> Each boundary encompasses sufficient land around a village to provide for expected new growth and development over the next 20 years. During this time, sewer and water lines will not be extended beyond the boundary. See Figure 1.

A village growth boundary attempts

### Village Growth Boundary

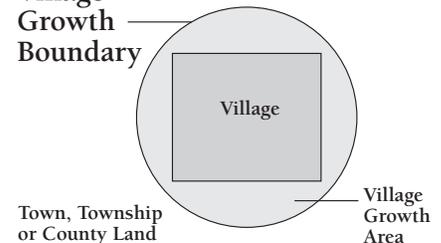


Figure 1

to phase growth, not stop it. Ideally, a village and one or more townships can enter into an intergovernmental agreement to establish a growth boundary. But in Lancaster County, the villages and townships have simply made "handshake deals" to create the growth boundaries. And so far, the boundaries have held.

The areas within the village growth boundaries are meant to serve as "sponges" for absorbing new development, according to Dean Severson, Senior Planner with the Lancaster County Planning Commission.

Village growth areas with access to

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<sup>1</sup> In Pennsylvania, a county may be divided into several townships, one or more cities, and a number of boroughs. A township covers about 25,000 acres and has control over planning and zoning within its boundaries. A borough is an incorporated village or town, with control over planning and zoning within its boundaries. An intergovernmental agreement is a good way for a borough and the adjacent townships to coordinate their planning for growth.

<sup>2</sup> Depending on the jurisdiction, growth areas may require approval or concurrence by a township, county, or regional government. Also, note that Oregon, Washington, Tennessee, and parts of California and Florida use growth boundaries.

### Elements of a Village Growth Boundary

1. Designated growth area/boundary.<sup>2</sup> In addition, criteria for when and where the designated growth boundary can be expanded.
2. Central sewer and water service, and defined service areas. The location of this infrastructure is important in directing growth.
3. Mixed-use zoning. This can allow commercial and residential uses with a single building or on the same lot.
4. Design standards. Quality design is essential to make medium density and mixed-use development attractive.
5. An official map. The map can identify a future street pattern for new development to promote a compact form.
6. Public transit and walkability (sidewalks and trails) options a plus. This makes the village more accessible to the outside world and can help to tie the village together.
7. Maintaining the edge between the village and the countryside.
8. A capital improvements program to service areas designated for growth with schools, police and fire protection, and parks, as well as central sewer and water facilities. The CIP should be closely coordinated with the growth boundary.

Editor's Note:

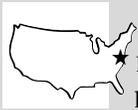
## Big Projects on the Edge

Planning Commissioners Journal readers might recall last Winter's issue where I wrote about the major challenges facing the small

town of Middleburg, Virginia, and the small city of Gunnison, Colorado. Each faced a major project having the potential of altering the character of the existing community.

In both cases, the development proposals were for areas on the edge – similar to the

situation Tom Daniels covers in his article. The challenge facing planners and elected officials has been how to integrate these large-scale developments into the existing settlement pattern.



### Middleburg, Virginia

David Beniamino is the town planner for Middleburg, Virginia, a small town (population 632) located on the fringe of the Washington, D.C. metro area. Beniamino recounted to me the tough and lengthy negotiations the town has had with the developer of the Salamander project, a planned 168 room resort hotel and spa with a substantial amount of accompanying residential development (110 dwelling units) and commercial space (100,000 square feet).

The project, now under construction, occupies 312 acres which were annexed into Middleburg. The annexation itself was one of the earliest, but most important, aspects of



Looking towards site of Salamander development.

the entire development process as it enabled the town to have much more say over the project.

As Beniamino explained, the community had mixed feelings about the proposal, with some residents stressing its positive fiscal impacts, and others expressing concern about how the scale of the project would radically alter the town's character and existing pattern of development.

In shaping how to respond to the proposal, the town – largely through the leadership of its planning commission – provided a

quite extensive public involvement process. An outside consultant was brought in, and charrettes and other public meetings were held. This helped lead to the drafting of a detailed "small area land use plan" for the tract and a new mixed-use village zoning district.

During the negotiations, the project has been reshaped in several ways to allow it to better fit into the community. One of the plan's recommendations was the preparation of design guidelines. Special attention has also been paid to how new streets and housing will tie in to the existing street grid. The commercial development will be located closer to the town center.

The project also now includes housing affordable to those working in Middleburg and to seniors. Twelve of the units, for example, will be set aside for teachers or other employees of Middleburg's three elementary and secondary schools (two are private schools).

Also important, three-quarters of the 312 acre tract has been placed under permanent conservation easement.



### Gunnison, Colorado

What I heard in Gunnison, Colorado, in many ways parallels Middleburg's story. Gunnison is a city of 5,400, and serves as the "gateway" community to the Mt. Crested Butte ski area.

The development proposal now on the table involves 860 acres straddling U.S. Route 50 near Gunnison's eastern border. The "Gunnison Rising" project includes several components: about 900 units of residential housing; an equestrian center; nearly one million square feet of commercial and office space; a trails system; and an RV recreational resort that could accommodate 500 RVs.

The project falls within the city's 3-mile urban growth boundary. As Planning & Community Development Director Steve Westbay explained, the 3-mile line is critical to managing growth. Moreover, for the project to move forward, it needs to be annexed into the city and connected to municipal

sewer and water (the city will also need to approve the utility service plan). Obviously, this gives the city some leverage during negotiations.

Westbay indicated that street connectivity and the impact of the project on Gunnison's existing "urban form" are key issues. The city wants to ensure that a distinctive city/country edge remains.

Despite the enormous amount of time city staff, the planning commission, and the



The Gunnison Rising site borders Route 50.

city council have already spent dealing with the development proposal, Westbay told me that from a planning and negotiating perspective it's still easier to deal with a single large project like Gunnison Rising, than with a number of separate smaller projects.

Another plus according to Westbay is the fact that Gunnison had started rewriting its Master Plan in advance of the development proposal. As Westbay explained, community consensus had already been reached on "the big overarching philosophies" that were "engrained in the plan." This provided a better framework for dealing with the Gunnison Rising proposal.

• For more on the Salamander project in Middleburg: <[www.salamanderresort.com](http://www.salamanderresort.com)>.

• For more on Gunnison Rising: <[www.cityofgunnison-co.gov](http://www.cityofgunnison-co.gov)> and <[www.gunnisonrising.com](http://www.gunnisonrising.com)>.

• See also my Route 50 trip reports on Middleburg and Gunnison: <[www.rte50.com](http://www.rte50.com)>.

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public sewer and water have a minimum target density of five dwelling units per acre. In crossroad hamlets without central sewer or water service, the maximum density is two dwelling units per acre. But Severson notes that these growth boundary strategies are seeing only “limited success” because of the strong demand for rural house lots rather than higher density development next to villages.

Severson cautions that it is also necessary to maintain an inventory of developable land within a designated village growth area. One way to manage the sequencing of development within a growth area is to use an “agricultural holding zone” or “village holding zone.” In order to receive permission for a rezoning to residential, commercial, or mixed-use, an applicant would have to show that the property is adjacent to fairly dense development.

Policies about development on the edge of a village can be part of a village’s “gateway plan” – that is, a plan focusing on land use along the main entryways to a community. “As people come into your village, that’s when people get a sense of who you are,” Severson points out. For example, many people value having a distinct edge between the village and the countryside.

One way to ensure that edge is for the county (or village) to purchase a conservation easement on farmland next to the growth boundary. This has been a fairly common practice in Lancaster County, and the conservation easements in effect made parts of the growth boundary permanent and help to direct future boundary expansions away from good farming areas. Severson notes, however, that “this approach has been revised somewhat to place more emphasis on preserving larger contiguous blocks of farmland more distant from the village boundary.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For more on growth management in Lancaster County, see *Balance: The Growth Management Element* (County Planning Commission, 2006); available at: <[www.co.lancaster.pa.us/planning/lib/planning/balance\\_full\\_report.pdf](http://www.co.lancaster.pa.us/planning/lib/planning/balance_full_report.pdf)>.

## CONSOLIDATING LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

In many parts of the Northeast and Midwest, a village is usually set entirely within the bounds of a Town or a “township” of about 25,000 acres. That is, the Town or township surrounds the village. Yet villages are often separate municipal governments, with their own tax base and control over planning and zoning within their boundaries. In fact, villages end up competing with the Town or township for tax base and development. This, in turn, can make it difficult for the village because in this competition the Town or township usually wins because of (generally) lower property taxes and more room to build.

One example of the benefits of consolidation, and how it relates to managing growth, can be seen in the relationship between the Town and the Village of Richmond, in northwest Vermont. In 1990, the Village of Richmond, Vermont (population 1,000) and the surrounding Town of Richmond (population 3,000) voted to merge their municipalities into a single community.

One reason for the consolidation was to gain greater efficiencies by combining overlapping services, especially police and highway maintenance. Another reason was to better manage growth.

Even prior to the merger, the town and village had a joint zoning ordinance. But the updated 1996 zoning ordinance included a “gateway” zoning district north of the village which requires parking behind any buildings as a way to minimize the feel of a commercial strip. Northwest of the village, the town adopted agricultural/residential zoning with a one-acre minimum lot size, in addition to a restrictive flood hazard overlay district, which has had the effect of keeping land open between the village and an interstate interchange.

Perhaps most significantly, the new consolidated town government has not expanded the central sewer and water service area since 1972. The village sits in a valley which is bisected by the Winooski River and its floodplain. There

is some buildable land on the north and south sides of the village, but little available land to the east and west.

According to Town Administrator Ron Rodjenski, some infill residential projects have been built within the village. “Development creep” adjacent to the village, however, has been limited because the town does not allow new residential or commercial development within the 100-year floodplain or on steep slopes having a maximum 8 percent grade for new roads.

Most years, the town issues about 12 to 15 dwelling unit permits, said Rodjenski, and most of these permits are for homes outside of the village. Yet, high lot prices, recently in the \$100,000 to \$200,000 range, have kept the market for rural residences small. Another concern is that there are a number of large parcels next to the village that some townspeople would like to see preserved through conservation easements – though so far that has not happened.

Both Richmond’s restrictive floodplain zoning and the non-expansion of its sewer and water service area are having the impact, at least in part, of managing growth while respecting the traditional development pattern – a pattern that the town’s residents like and want to maintain.

### SUMMING UP:

Villages are not static places locked in a time-war. They can and do change. The challenge for planners and elected officials is to allow for new development that is not at odds with the existing, traditional pattern of village development. Moreover, as energy prices continue to rise, the option of living in a compact, walkable community with a mix of land uses is likely to increase in popularity. ♦

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