

GENESEE TRANSPORTATION COUNCIL

Revitalizing Village and Neighborhood Centers

Traditional village and neighborhood center development patterns have produced comfortable, human-scale environments that express a strong sense of place. Village and neighborhood centers also provide physical evidence of a community's history.

These traditional land use patterns have changed and evolved over time to meet current transportation needs and different economic conditions. As newer commercial strips and shopping malls were built along new or improved roadways, many businesses moved out of the village and neighborhood centers to these locations, leaving behind vacant or underutilized buildings. Villages and neighborhoods struggle to counter these trends, often sacrificing important historic resources in the process.

Planning the Future, Learning from the Past

The Genesee Transportation Council has funded numerous studies to help traditional village and neighborhood centers recover and preserve their special character that has evolved over the centuries.

The first step to revitalization is understanding how traditional patterns evolved to ensure that the future development of village and neighborhood centers will enhance and not detract from their unique, historic character.

Existing Conditions

Some of the major concerns that many villages and neighborhoods in our region share relate to their existing conditions:

Underutilized and Vacant Lots and Structures. Many village and neighborhood businesses moved to newer commercial locations, leaving vacant land, vacant or underutilized buildings, and poorly defined parking lots.

Visual Clutter. Excessive signage, oversized signs, and overhead utility lines clutter downtown areas and detract from attractive traditional building facades. Poor street lighting discourages evening use.

Open Spaces. Open spaces in village and neighborhood centers were traditionally oriented toward pedestrian use and social interaction. Over time, many open spaces have been neglected, paved, or underutilized. Although many communities have a waterfront within walking distance, inadequate facilities discourage its recreational use by the community. Many street trees planted decades ago have died and not been replaced.

Traffic Circulation. Sections of traditional street networks have been altered over the years with one-way streets, widened traffic lanes, numerous curb cuts, and larger turning radii at intersections which encourage higher motor vehicle speeds. The result works well neither for cars nor pedestrians.

Revitalization Efforts

The experience of many communities in our region, acquired in part through GTC-funded planning studies, is that the following steps are fundamental to revitalizing existing village and neighborhood centers in ways that are compatible with their historic character and accommodate future economic development.

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Enhance the Streets. Attractive streetscapes are critical to villages and neighborhoods and encourage people to walk in the central area. Add features such as high-visibility crosswalks, countdown pedestrian signals, and, where appropriate, curb bump-outs, traffic calming techniques, and medians to improve pedestrian and vehicle circulation and safety.

Improve Existing Sidewalks and Trails and Become Bicycle-Friendly. Add bike lanes and bike parking. Connect to existing bike paths outside of the village or neighborhood, if possible. Extend sidewalks and trails between commercial and residential areas. Plant street trees and flowers. Landscaping reinforces the pedestrian network and defines spaces for public use. Connect the center to the waterfront with a multi-use trail.

Improve the Park. Plant shade trees in the village square or neighborhood park, and install benches and a gazebo. The open space serves as a focus for community activities and provides a pleasant place for people to rest and socialize. Schedule regular activities to reinforce the park as a public space. This has safety benefits as well.

Replace Existing Street Lights. Substitute existing lighting with fixtures that are compatible with architectural styles in the village or neighborhood, especially on the main commercial street and in the village square or neighborhood park. All lights are installed at a height that provides for pedestrian and vehicular safety, but are not obtrusive or glaring.

Develop New Sign Regulations. Construct new signage in proportion and scale to the facade, with traditional materials, complimentary colors, and locations used to unify the center. Replace existing non-conforming signage over time.

Adapt Existing Vacant Structures for New Uses Rather than Replace Them, Wherever Possible. Make facade improvements to existing structures consistent with the historic flavor of the surrounding street. Some residential buildings may be converted to commercial or professional office uses, and some commercial buildings may be converted to residential. Make converted buildings accessible to persons with disabilities.

Accommodate Infill Development Where Appropriate. Encourage infill development, including mixed-use, with respect to the mass, scale, materials, and setbacks of existing buildings along the street. Locate multi-family or elderly housing adjacent to activities and services.

Provide Adequate Parking. Redesign existing municipal parking lots to the rear of buildings with attractive landscaping, signage, and lighting to provide any additional parking for infill and adaptive reuse developments. Re-stripe commercial streets to accommodate on-street parking, as appropriate, and encourage and designate them as free parking areas.

Zoning. Adapt existing zoning to permit the wide variety of activities traditionally a part of a vigorous community center.

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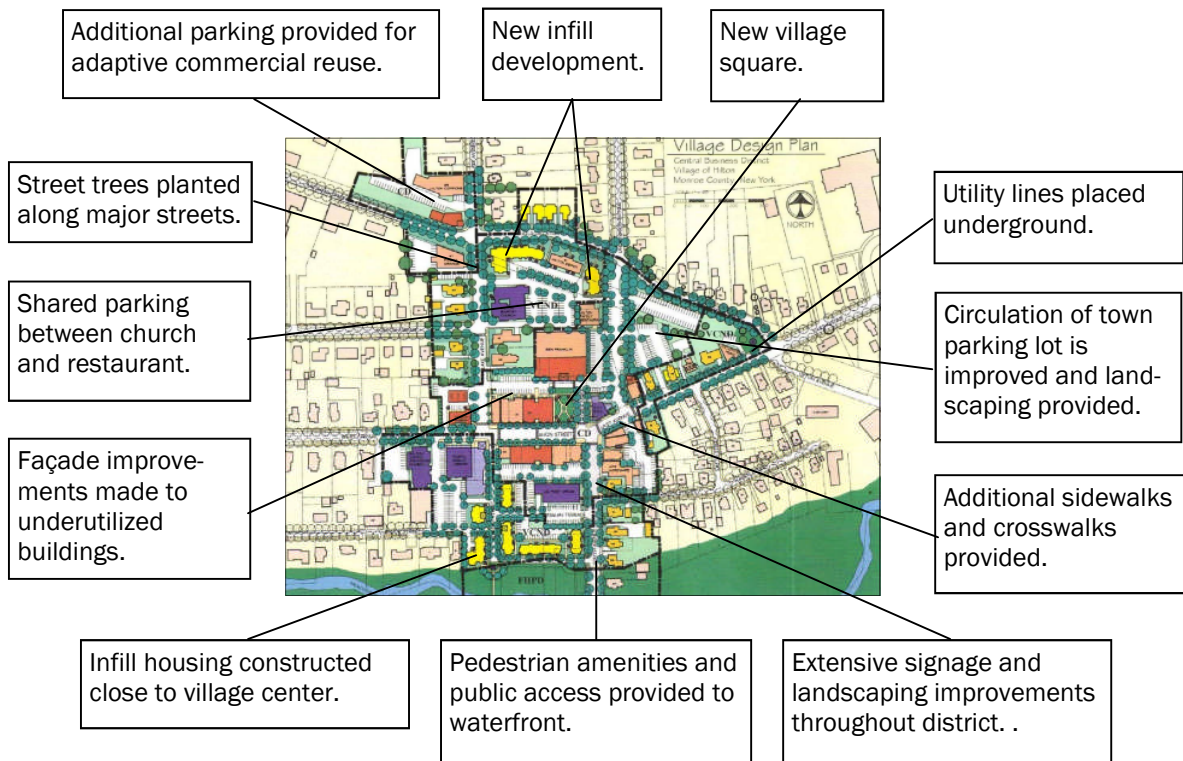
Thriving Communities

Village and neighborhood centers around the Genesee-Finger Lakes Region have devised their own particular solutions to enhance, encourage, and preserve traditional land use and transportation patterns that can support today's modern communities.

For more information, visit www.gtcmpto.org. Click "Linking Transportation and Land Use to Create Thriving Communities".

Case Study

Below is the Design Plan for the Village of Hilton's Village Center Overlay District, incorporating many of the recommended revitalization strategies.



- Genesee Transportation Council - September 2010
(Adapted from materials published by the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission)

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