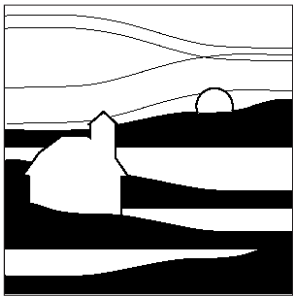
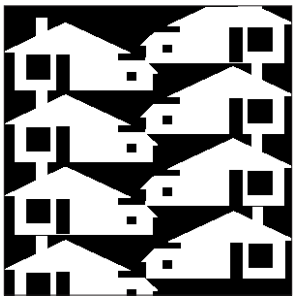
6. Traditional Neighborhood Design

Fact Sheet





This smart growth tool can be used in rural, suburban, or urban communities.

What is Traditional Neighborhood Design?

Traditional Neighborhood Design (TND) is a planning concept that calls for residential neighborhoods to be designed in the format of small, early 20th century villages and neighborhoods. Those traditional formats were characterized by one-family and two-family homes on small lots, narrow front yards with front porches and gardens, detached garages in the backyard, walkable "Main Street" commercial areas with shops lining the sidewalk, and public parks, town greens, or village squares.

TND is intended to provide an alternative to bland subdivisions and suburban sprawl. Most contemporary development is characterized by an orientation to the automobile, separation of land uses, and low intensities. In contrast, TND calls for compact, pedestrian-oriented neighborhoods with a mix of commercial and residential uses, a variety of housing types, and public places where people have opportunities to socialize and engage in civic life. The automobile is still accommodated, with ample parking and efficient circulation, but it no longer dominates the landscape.

Toolbox

Compact, mixed use, pedestrian-oriented development is the hallmark of TND, as with Transit Oriented Development (TOD). But TND places much greater emphasis on the physical layout of the neighborhood and the design of buildings and public spaces. The following tools are intended to help create an environment that is fully accommodating to and comfortable for pedestrians.

- **Compact Mixed-Use Development.** Many of the tools used to promote compact, mixed-use development in a TND area are the same as those that would be applicable in the context of TOD. For a discussion of those tools, please refer to Chapter 5.
- **Minimum Residential Density.** For TOD, the minimum densities in a station area are partly determined by transit ridership considerations. In TND, the determination of density is more a question of community character. Typically, quarter-acre single-family lots (resulting in about 4 units per acre) are the minimum necessary to create a reasonably walkable area that looks and feels like a traditional neighborhood, as

opposed to a subdivision. There is no upper limit on density for a TND area. However, when densities start to exceed about 30 to 35 units per net acre[1], multi-family apartment buildings with internal corridors and elevators become necessary, and the area takes on a more urban flavor. These density levels may or may not be appropriate, depending on the goals established for the area's character.

Narrower Front Setbacks. In many conventional residential subdivisions, required front setbacks are often 40 feet or more. Moreover, the garage is often located toward the front of the house, with the front door set even father back from the street. Along commercial streets, shopping centers are typically set back several hundred feet from the street, with large parking lots in front. Such patterns of development are primarily oriented to auto access and preclude effective pedestrian access and circulation. Placing buildings closer to the sidewalk would help make those streets more pedestrian-oriented.

- Residential Areas. Aside from reducing the front setback requirement, narrower front yards can be promoted by imposing maximum front setbacks or built-to lines (which would require that the front façade be placed a certain distance from the front property line). A built-to line is a more rigid requirement than the maximum setback approach, resulting in a different aesthetic effect, but either approach can be effective in promoting a more pedestrian-friendly environment.
- Commercial Areas. As for residential structures, commercial buildings can be required to be closer to the street by maximum setbacks or built-to lines. Parking lots would then be located to the side of or the rear of buildings, and ideally, parking would be broken up into a series of small lots, interspersed with landscaping and buildings.

Greater Front Setbacks for Garages. Many conventional subdivisions have streetscapes that are visually dominated by large two- or three-car garages. In addition to creating a dull

[1]This is most that can be achieved in two-story "perfect fours" on 1/8-acre lots. "Perfect fours" can be designed such that each unit has a private, ground-level, exterior entrance, consistent with a small-town "neighborhood" format.

These small-lot single-family homes in Kentlands, Maryland help create a village-like environment evocative of early 20th-century neighborhoods. (Source:Congress for New Urbanism, Photo Bank.)

Narrow front yards, front porches, and the absence of garages contribute to a pedestrian-oriented environment in Celebration, Florida. (Source: Congress for New Urbanism, Photo Bank.)

streetscape, such a design favors the automobile. By placing the garage farther back from the street, the garage is visually and functionally diminished from a design perspective, and the pedestrian entrance is highlighted. One approach is to require that the garage façade be set back farther from the front property line than the façade of the rest of the house. A more strict approach would be to require or provide incentives for detached garages, which must be placed in the backyard.

"In-Scale" Building Design. Excessively out-of-scale or buildings can seem imposing and uninviting to pedestrians. Generally, pedestrians gravitate toward realms where buildings are or appear to be smaller in scale with some architectural variety and detailing. This is not to say that large buildings cannot be built, but that building massing and facades should be in-scale with their surroundings and inviting to pedestrians. Required design standards or recommended design guidelines can be used to promote more sensitive architectural design.

Orientation of Buildings to the Street. Commercial streets with entrances off the sidewalk and display windows that allow views into the stores tend to be popular with pedestrians. Residential streets where houses have front porches, prominent front doors, and smaller or less prominently placed garages, are attractive for walking. In commercial areas, zoning provisions could require principal entrances to face the street, rather than the parking lot, and a minimum proportion of the ground-floor façade could be required to have windows. In residential areas, main entrances can also be required to face the front yard, and front porches can be encouraged by not counting them toward building or lot coverage limitations.

Walkable Street Patterns. Dead-end cul-de-sacs and curvilinear streets, combined with low-density development patterns, make pedestrians undergo circuitous routes in order to reach their destinations. As a result, people have a natural incentive to use their cars instead. Street grids generally allow better pedestrian circulation because they have more intersections and more connecting streets. Subdivision regulations could be revised to require a minimum number of connecting streets to existing roads and/or a limitation on the number of cul-de-sacs, or a similar regulation the encourages pedestri-

an-friendly street patterns. Another option is for towns to adopt a roadway plan as part of the local municipal plan. According to State law, subdivisions can then be required to comply with the roadway plan.

Village-Style Roadway Design. In conventional subdivision standards, it is not uncommon for new residential areas to have street widths of 50 to 60 feet. This disproportionately wide cartway (relative to the typical number on cars on local streets) tends to encourage speeding and generally makes the neighborhood less conducive to walking or biking. In addition, State roads are subject to expansion as development and traffic levels increase, because of the State DOT's emphasis on vehicular flow. In TND areas, roadway standards — through subdivision standards and State DOT policy — should promote narrower streets with sidewalks, crosswalks, traffic-calming measures, streetscape amenities, landscaping, and other features necessary to slow down cars and encourage walking.

Pedestrian Amenities. Streetscape design is also a critical factor in pedestrian circulation. Through zoning and subdivision requirements, streets in new residential and commercial areas can be designed with sidewalks, lighting, benches, and other amenities that are conducive to pedestrian activity. On existing commercial streets, such streetscape improvements can be implemented through a combined effort of the municipal government and local businesses. For more information on streetscape improvements along traditional "Main Streets", please refer to Chapter 7.

Design and Landscaping of Parking Lots. Zoning provisions can be used to regulate the design of parking lots and landscaping. The location of parking lots behind or beside commercial buildings can help make sidewalks more pedestrian-oriented. Consolidating parking lots and reducing curb cuts along the street frontage can reduce the potential for automobile/pedestrian conflicts. In addition to such basic site planning, parking lots themselves should be designed in close coordination with landscaping, pedestrian walkways, and pedestrian amenities, such that large areas of asphalt are attractively broken up. Parking lots can even be outfitted with electrical and water outlets, such that they can be easily converted into plazas for special events, performances, and farmers markets.

Mashpee Commons, Mashpee, MA
Traditional Neighborhood Design

Mashpee Commons, located in western Cape Cod, is one of the most successful examples of TND in the U.S. The original 1986 plan involved the transformation of a defunct strip-style shopping center into a neo-traditional village center with a mix of shops, restaurants, offices, civic uses, and about 100 housing units. The original parking lot of the shopping center was filled in with small, clustered buildings, organized around and oriented to a grid of pedestrian walkways. Residential units were in the form of second-floor apartments above the shops. The design of the project built upon the traditional architectural styles, materials, and scale of a colonial New England village.

The 1986 plan was so successful, that both its commercial and residential components were expanded. Five interconnected neighborhoods around Mashpee Commons have been planned, all in a TND format. These neighborhoods have a mix of apartments, townhouses, and both small-lot and large-lot single-family homes, with decreasing densities farther away from the center. To compensate for the compact development pattern, approximately 65 percent of the project's land area is dedicated to open space and parks.

The TND design in the residential neighborhoods is strongly oriented to pedestrians. Many residences are outfitted with front porches. Sidewalks and neighborhood parks are provided throughout. Streets are designed with traffic-calming measures and favor pedestrian and bicycle circulation. A street grid provides connections back to Mashpee Commons, which serves as the civic and commercial core of the community.

Public Parks, Town Greens, and Village Squares. Parks and public spaces are critical components of TND. In New England towns, there is a long history of coordinated town and park development. The "town green" — intended in early Colonial times for a number of uses, including animal grazing, public markets, and public meetings — were eventually converted into public parks and are still used for a variety of activities and events nowadays. Such public spaces are absolutely essential in TND areas, where houses have smaller private yards. In addition, such parks and public spaces are attractive in the midst of the pedestrian-oriented shopping area, because they provide a place for resting, having a picnic lunch, or holding events that attract business to the nearby shops. They also provide visual "breaks" in the built environment.

Keys to Success

Identify potential areas for TND. Contrary to some of the promotional literature, TND need not be superimposed on all parts of a town. A town could benefit from having a range of different living and shopping environments that capture different segments of the real estate and retail markets. While compact housing in a TND setting may appeal to seniors, singles, and young couples, low-density single-family homes should still be provided elsewhere, as they tend to be the housing of choice for families with young children. While there are market niches that are well-suited to a "Main Street" environment (antiques, restaurants, cultural activities), there is still a place for auto-oriented commercial development. In addition, the lack of infrastructure (i.e., water or sewer) might make compact TND-style development difficult or impossible. Thus, the first step must be to identify areas where TND might be appropriate.

Develop a community-based vision and plan for TND areas. A long-range planning effort is necessary to determine the appropriate densities, housing types, commercial development, character, and amenities for the TND area, as well as how the TND is related to other parts of town. The plan should play close attention to circulation. Traffic flow and pedestri-

an/bike circulation should be balanced, and development should be closely integrated with transit services (whether bus or rail). For more information on transit-land use coordination, please refer to Chapter 5. The planning effort should involve key stakeholders (residents, business leaders, property owners, transit riders, transit officials, and so on) and should result in a detailed TND plan that is ultimately incorporated into the municipality's comprehensive plan.

Establish or reinforce a "Main Street" spine. Pedestrian-oriented stores should be clustered together along a "Main Street" corridor that encourages cross-fertilization of customers between stores, restaurants, and other attractions. TND development can either be clustered around an historic Main Street, or a new "Main Street" setting can be created, in the model of Mashpee Commons. Although auto-oriented and pedestrian-oriented commercial areas can co-exist, they should be distinctly separated. Auto-oriented uses should not encroach into the pedestrian-oriented realm, lest traffic congestion and speeding diminish the "Main Street" environment.

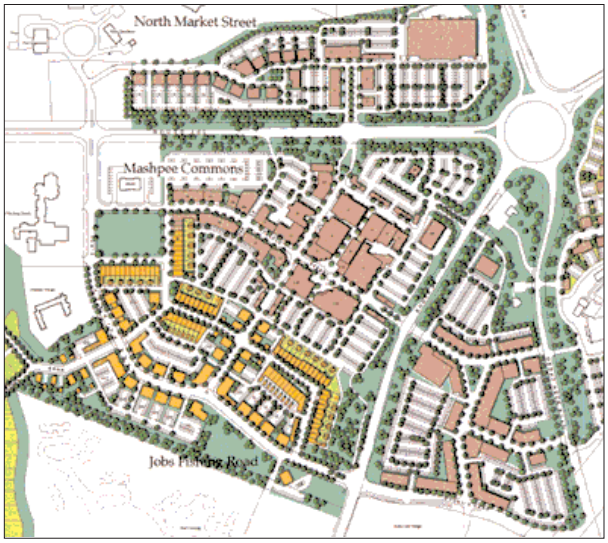
Concentrate public institutions on or near "Main Street". Main Street is not only a commercial area, but a civic center as well. To the extent that public institutions are provided in the TND area — such as libraries, schools, museums, etc. — they should have a Main Street address or should be located just off Main Street. This would help reinforce the civic role and commercial strength of Main Street.

Conduct a public education campaign. The concept of TND development, while attractive to many people, still meets with resistance from developers, property owners, and residents. In addition to fears of urbanization (traffic, noise, low-income populations) there is the fear that high-density development reduces the value of surrounding properties. A public

education campaign should "sell" TND based on its quality-of-life advantages, such as the presence of local services and facilities (i.e., corner stores, parks, schools) within walking distance of homes and a pedestrian-oriented environment that reduces automobile dependency. These features can increase property values, provided that development is well designed. The visioning and planning process mentioned above provides an opportunity to engage in an education campaign and to ensure that TND fits into its surroundings.

How Can the State Help?

Expand local authority to regulate aesthetics. Currently, a major impediment to TND in the Hartford region is that municipalities have no authority to impose design requirements outside of a village district, aside from general regulations with regard to building height and size. At a minimum, local government should be able to regulate the orientation of building entrances, the amount of fenestration, and façade treatments (particularly for commercial buildings). Regulations need not go so far to proscribe architectural styles, as TND does not need to adhere to any particular design genre, such as Colonial or Victorian.



The 1986 plan for Mashpee Commons helped convert an old shopping center (at left) into a mixed-use New England village. The plan was so successful that five residential neighborhoods — all in a TND format — were planned around the Commons. (Source: Imai Keller, FHWA, www.mashpeecommons.com)

For More Information

1. Congress for the New Urbanism, San Francisco, CA. Phone: (415) 495-2255, <www.cnu.org>.
2. Local Government Commission and the Center for Livable Communities, Sacramento, CA. Phone: (916) 448-1198, <www.lgc.org>.
3. New Urban News, Phone: (607) 275-3087, <www.newurbannews.com>.
4. Project for Public Spaces, New York, NY. Phone: (212) 620-5660, <www.pps.org>.
5. Regional Plan Association. Building Livable Communities: A Community Design Handbook for Connecticut Towns. New York: Regional Plan Association, June 1997.

See also, Detailed Technical Analysis on Traditional Neighborhood Design, available through CRCOG.

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