

Great Neighborhoods: A Commitment to Primacy

INTRODUCTION.

A core asset of every town is its neighborhoods. As the city pursues its **vision** of being an interesting, pleasant and prosperous place, neighborhood creation, enhancement and preservation must take center stage as a primary **strategy** of the city.

The first step is to embrace **the primacy of neighborhoods** as the most important obligation of the city. The city must fully commit to the idea that neighborhoods, residences, and places where people live are of primary importance to the city.

Neighborhoods and homes must be valued and protected from crime, falling property values, structural deterioration and obnoxious intrusions such as noise, trash and cut-through traffic. A “**Great Neighborhoods**” program is a partnership between neighborhoods and the city to value and protect the quality of residential life for all residents.

The strategic objectives critical to fulfilling the city’s strategy of preserving and enhancing its neighborhoods are:

- To commit the city to the importance of preserving and enhancing neighborhoods.
- To organize, empower and train the residents and stakeholders to be leaders.
- To plan neighborhoods to serve the social, physical and economic needs of residents and the city.
- To protect and enhance existing and new neighborhoods.
- To enable new investments through home improvements and infill housing.
- To connect neighborhoods to parks, schools, shopping and the rest of the city.



Single-family neighborhoods are traditional.



Mixed-use neighborhoods with apartments, offices and shops are emerging.

WHAT MAKES A GREAT NEIGHBORHOOD.

1. A variety of functional attributes that contribute to a resident’s day-to-day living [residential, commercial or mixed use].
2. Access to all modes of mobility.
3. Design and architectural features that are visually interesting.
4. Encouragements for human contact and social activities.
5. Promotions for community involvement and maintenance of a secure environment.
6. Promotion of sustainability principles that are responsive to climatic demands.
7. Memorable character.

Source: Planning Magazine, January 2008, p8.

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THE PRIMACY OF NEIGHBORHOODS.

The first responsibility of every city is to protect the homes and neighborhoods of its citizens. Neighborhood preservation, enhancement and protection are critical activities for a city to be an interesting, prosperous and pleasant place to live.

Primacy of neighborhoods is important:

- **First**, neighborhoods are where most people live and raise their families, invest their savings and spend their time. A basic function of the city is to protect the homes and neighborhoods of its citizens.
- The **second** reason is economic. Residences should be appreciating assets. Historically, home investment has been the primary means for creating family wealth.
- **Thirdly**, prosperity of the entire community depends on having sound neighborhoods. People decide to stay in town because of the quality of life in the neighborhoods. New employers and employees decide to move to a community for the same reasons.



New homes in older neighborhoods.

- The **fourth** reason is about community rejuvenation. Redevelopment and infill are a constant process in any living organism such as a city. Neighborhoods that feel vulnerable to intrusions caused by infill and redevelopment must fight it in nearby corridors or centers. Fear of change diminishes a city's ability to continue to re-invent itself with new investment. Trust based on responsible performance by the city is critical to enable community rejuvenation.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES AND PRINCIPLES FOR A NEIGHBORHOOD PLAN.

Commit

Neighborhoods host the majority of the city's residents. The immediate and long-term health of every neighborhood and every home in every neighborhood sets the tone for the entire city; remembering that the weakest neighborhoods reflect city values. The stability, safety and preservation of property values are the joint responsibility of the homeowners and the city; both must be committed to the success of all neighborhoods.

Organize

The city can establish a neighborhood planning grant program to fund organizational and planning activities in neighborhoods that have an interest in protecting and enhancing their community. A "Qualify" Neighborhood Program can solicit neighborhoods to organize themselves and seek certification as a "Qualified" Association, to solicit applications for city grant support to complete neighborhood plans using a city-created *Guide for Neighborhood Planning*.

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Invest

Continue to provide processes and incentives to enable and encourage replacement and the proper expansion of existing homes through home improvements and expansions plus infill of new homes and apartments with redevelopment activities that protect the integrity of the established neighborhoods. Plan public improvement investments.

Plan

Budget funds and city staff each year to support neighborhood planning for “qualified” associations. Review, amend as necessary and approve the Neighborhood Plan, including codes, once it has been completed according to city standards.

Protect and Enhance

Continue to refine the city’s comprehensive plan and land development regulations to protect neighborhoods from obnoxious intrusions and adjacent activities, public service deficiencies and code violations.

Connect

Continue to provide sidewalks, crosswalks, street lights, trails and other pedestrian and bicycle connections between neighborhoods, schools, parks and neighborhood shopping areas.

Educate and Communicate

The city is in a great position to educate neighborhood leaders and organizers knowing that a better informed and educated citizenry is a community asset.



Older neighborhoods are invaluable.



Housing of all types accommodate price variety.

PRINCIPLES OF NEIGHBORHOOD DESIGN.

- They are walkable from end to end,
- They are walkable to schools, parks and shopping,
- They have a civic core and a mix of uses and amenities,
- They have an interconnected street network,
- They have recognizable boundaries,
- They provide for chance meetings and privacy, and
- They have a variety of housing types.

Source: Urban Land Magazine, May 2004, p63.

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Neighborhood Design Principles.

The Inner City Task Force of the Congress for the New Urbanism has developed a set of design principles that have proven effective in inner city neighborhoods. These principles have been tested in several HOPE VI projects. They are proposed as a set of working principles to be further tested and refined through use.

- **Citizen and Community Involvement:** Engage residents, neighbors, civic leaders, politicians, bureaucrats, developers, and local institutions throughout the process of designing change for neighborhoods.
- **Economic Opportunity:** The design of neighborhood development should accommodate management techniques and scales of construction that can be contracted to local and minority businesses.
- **Diversity:** Provide a broad range of housing types and price levels to bring people of diverse ages, races, and incomes into daily interaction – strengthening the personal and civic bonds essential to an authentic community.
- **Neighborhoods:** Neighborhoods are compact, pedestrian-friendly, and mixed use with many activities of daily life available within walking distance. New development should help repair existing neighborhoods or create new ones and should not take the form of an isolated “project.”
- **Infill Development:** Reclaim and repair blighted and abandoned areas within existing neighborhoods by using infill development strategically to conserve economic investment and social fabric.
- **Mixed-Use:** Promote the creation of mixed-use neighborhoods that support the functions of daily life: employment, recreation, retail, civic and educational institutions.
- **City-wide and Regional Connections:** Neighborhoods should be connected to regional patterns of transportation and land use, to open space, and to natural systems. The primary task of all urban architecture and landscape design is the physical definition of streets and public spaces as places of shared use. Neighborhoods should have an interconnected network of streets and public open space.
- **Public Open Space:** The interconnected network of streets and public open space should provide opportunities for recreation and appropriate settings for civic buildings.
- **Safety and Civic Engagement:** The relationship of buildings and streets should enable neighbors to create a safe and stable neighborhood by providing “eyes on the street” and should encourage interaction and community identity. Provide a clear definition of public and private realm through block and street design responding to local traditions.
- **Dwelling as Mirror of Self:** Recognize the dwelling as the basic element of a neighborhood and as the key to self-esteem and community pride. This includes the clear definition of outdoor space for each dwelling.
- **Accessibility:** Buildings should be designed to be accessible and visitable while respecting traditional urban fabric.
- **Local Architectural Character and Design Codes:** The image and character of new development should respond to the best traditions of residential and mixed-use architecture in the area. The economic health and harmonious evolution of neighborhoods can be improved through graphic urban design codes that serve as predictable guides for change.

Source: *Principles for Inner City Neighborhood Design; A Collaboration of the Congress for the New Urbanism and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1999.*

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CRITICAL ELEMENTS FOR GREAT NEIGHBORHOODS.

The critical elements of a great neighborhood, regardless of its economic and social status, remain the same. Successful neighborhoods do not just happen; people make them happen.

Community-wide leaders know the critical elements and dynamics of successful neighborhoods including the processes and standards that will produce the desired results. Neighborhood leaders have a similar sense from a more localized perspective. In both cases, there are *critical elements in every neighborhood*:

1. A Viable and Diverse Housing Stock.

Neighborhoods need various types, styles and prices of housing. Subdivisions with identical houses are not usually great models for neighborhoods. The housing mix includes:

- Preservation of existing homes,
- Investment in existing homes through maintenance and expansion, and
- New infill housing of all types, densities and values consistent with the integrity of the established neighborhood.

2. **Public Safety.** There needs to be a sense of security with neighbors watching out for each other and enjoying a sense of security within their homes and neighborhoods.

3. **Trees and Beauty are Community Necessities.** Street trees, neighborhood tree canopies, trees in parks and parking lots create an entirely different impression than barren paved or open spaces; and they reduce heat-island effects.



Neighborhoods with quiet residential streets.



Street presence is important.

4. **Accessways.** Streets, buses, trains and bike/pedways that enable safe and convenient mobility in the neighborhood and in the city, including:

- **Neighborhood Streets** that are typically two lanes wide fronted with homes, space for casual on-street parking, sidewalks on both sides of the street, curbs and gutters, street lights, and canopy street trees. Neighborhood streets should be quiet, walkable, playable and visually enjoyable.
- **Residential Connector Streets** that are two or four-lane streets carrying more traffic than a neighborhood street; but still able to host residential houses.

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- **The four-laning of a street is not the rationale for converting its residential uses to non-residential uses.** They can remain successful residential streets if they have, or will have, sidewalks, street lights, canopy street trees, curbs and gutters with occasional on-street parking and traffic lights.
- **Transit, Pedestrian and Bicycle Connections** with a network of routes, walkways and bikeways that provide safe alternatives to auto travel.
- **Pedestrian and bike safety programs** with sidewalks, signs and street lights.



Transit services of all kinds.

5. Places Nearby and Safely Accessible that serve Daily Needs, including:

- **Ample and Accessible Parks and Open Spaces.** Parks, open spaces and walkable streets need to be available to residents for casual recreation, for neighborhood gatherings and for walking access to parks. There must be a social connection between the neighborhood and its elementary school. Attendance zones that do not split neighborhoods should be a major objective of the neighborhood plan.



Neighborhood parks are great meeting places.

- **Neighborhood Oriented Elementary Schools.** Neighborhoods need to be a physical and social link to schools.
- **Parks and Gathering Places** – The casual, unplanned encounter is an important part of life. The objective is to have post offices, city offices, shops, restaurants, libraries, parks and schools convenient to every neighborhood.



Farmers' markets are regular meeting places that build community.

- **Nearby Civic and Spiritual Institutions.** Non-obnoxious activities that provide open space, interesting architecture and variety such as small-scale libraries, places of worship and small shops with limited hours and parking are useful.

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- **The uses do not matter** as much as the form and scale of the buildings.
- **Nearby Neighborhood Serving Shopping and Businesses.** This proximity offers safe and convenient access to local jobs, as well as products and services for daily life.



6. **Pride of Place and Property.** This attribute is reflected by residents and property owners investing time and money to maintain and enhance their homes, neighborhoods and business. A strong relationship between the city and the neighborhood organizations fosters civic pride.

7. **Public Services.** Adequate public services help instill pride, and they encourage new investment since residents know their property will benefit from a high standard of maintenance for surrounding homes. Public services that protect property values including: frequent trash and garbage pick-up with periodic “bulk goods” disposal; code enforcement; adequate water and sewer facilities and flood protection.



THE “COMPLETE” NEIGHBORHOOD.

Neighborhoods are more than houses and subdivisions. Neighborhoods are organic places that grow and change. They are the places where families live and participate in society. They have homes, schools, parks, shopping and other activities integral to daily life. Building neighborhoods involves creating and strengthening all these places as a system.

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COMMITMENT: VISION TO STRATEGY TO ACTION.

The vision of the city as a pleasant and prosperous place depends on the successful strategy to create and maintain strong neighborhoods. The vision of the residents for their neighborhood drives the process.

The strategy for creating strong, successful and sustainable neighborhoods is based on the fundamental idea that neighborhoods exist as distinct physical, economic and social organizations. As with any organization, they benefit from planning, design, investment, management and maintenance.

The resulting Neighborhood Plans consist of numerous action plans to be executed by various city departments to protect and enhance neighborhood streets, parks, schools and shopping districts. Public facilities and services are critical to this effort.

CONCLUSIONS.

Neighborhood primacy. Strong neighborhoods that know they will be protected by the city are more amenable to supporting new development, redevelopment and infill that enable the city to continually rejuvenate itself.

The Vision-Strategy-Action Continuum. The community's *vision* of neighborhood primacy needs to drive the city's neighborhood *strategy* that then directs its every *action*. City action plans should be directly connected to its vision.

Institutionalize the Vision. Focus city action plans in a dedicated department or division of city governments driven by the vision of creating Great Neighborhoods throughout the city.

The Neighborhood Planning Process A Checklist

1. Establish or strengthen the neighborhood organization with a system that provides a guide to neighborhood planning and then "qualifies" neighborhood organizations to receive benefits from the city.
2. Delineate neighborhood boundaries that are defensible by the organization.
3. Prepare a land use and circulation plan for each neighborhood incorporating plans for streets, parks, schools, shops and the pathways that connect them.
4. Embrace a diversity of housing types, styles and price points reflecting the changing composition of the American household.
5. Plan for the full range of infrastructure from public safety to health care to stormwater management.
6. Establish a financial plan for funding and sustaining the neighborhood organization and its infrastructure systems.
7. Provide a beautification plan with canopy and decorative trees on all streets, parks and schools.
8. Establish communication systems within the neighborhood, the neighborhood organization and the host city government that are interactive and transparent using tradition and social media.
9. Fully engage the neighborhood organization and its residents with city government in the neighborhood planning, design, implementation and evaluation process.

Source: wck planning, inc.