

Main Street's Active Zones: "Not Too Tall, Not Too Long".

THE ORLANDO REGION'S CHARACTER MAIN STREETS...A Survey of Nine Towns.

The five county Orlando Region is fortunate to have many small cities and towns with character downtowns; towns that are attractive with successful retail and civic "main streets". A survey of nine towns reveals a commonality in the length of the main street active zones and the height of their buildings. The populations in the nine towns in 2010 ranged from 12,663 to 63,392 people. Each is a "centennial town", with over 100 years of incorporation.

CENTENNIAL TOWNS, Character takes time.

One reason for the similar pattern is the age of the towns. Most were developed as the railroad came to town; before elevators and steel frame construction.

Dates of Incorporation Orlando Region Character Towns	
Clermont	1916
DeLand	1882
Eustis	1883
Kissimmee	1883
Mount Dora	1910
Sanford	1887
Tavares	1885
Winter Garden	1903
Winter Park	1887

Source: wck | planning from Wikipedia

URBAN DESIGN [Standards Attached below].

In recent times, one hopes a sense of proportion has played a role in limiting the height of buildings and the length of Active Zones on main street based on market considerations and urban design principles.

POPULATION.

Interestingly, after a hundred years, the towns of character have some 20-40,000 residents.

Population, 2021 Central Florida Character Towns	
Clermont +	44,530
DeLand*	38,764
Eustis +	23,543
Kissimmee * +	79,436
Mount Dora +	16,665
Sanford * +	60,681
Tavares * +	19,526
Winter Garden	46,502
Winter Park	29,131

Source: The American Fact Finder, US Census.
* County Seats + downtown waterfront

THE HEIGHT OF BUILDINGS ON MAIN STREET.

The survey discovered building heights in the nine main street Active Zones. The Active Zone limits were liberally construed; some tall buildings are close but not actually in the Zones.

- Interestingly, the building heights on the main streets are pretty uniform at 2-stories.
- There are nineteen buildings on the nine main streets with 3-stories; nine with 4-stories. Ten of these are newer city or county buildings without ground floor retail.
- There are only four buildings in the nine towns at 5 stories or more. Three are office buildings and one is a residential building; all have ground floor retail uses.

Building heights on main street, in the Active Zone, are important. Buildings of 2-4 stories provide a comforting "enclosure" at the street level.

The upper floors are typically used for offices, but some creative tenants were found. Taller buildings add nothing to the street and disturb the skyline based on street tree heights.

	Predominant # of Floors	# Bldgs. w/ 3-4 Floors	# Bldgs 5+
<u>Floors</u>			
Clermont	1-2	1	
DeLand	2-3	6	1
Eustis	2	1	
Kissimmee	2-3	6	1
Mount Dora	2	2	
Sanford	2	1	1
Tavares	1-2	6	
Winter Garden	1-2	3	
Winter Park	2	2	1

RECENT MASTER PLANNED DOWNTOWNS.

In the Orlando Region, three master planned “new towns” have emerged: Celebration, Avalon Park and Baldwin Park. Celebration’s main street has three and four story buildings; Baldwin Park has three story buildings on main street and Avalon Park has three and four story buildings along its main streets. Nothing taller!

LENGTH OF ACTIVE ZONES ON MAIN STREET.

The survey of nine character towns in the Orlando Region reveals a common length of their “main street” **active zones**.

- The active zone on main street includes the blocks with restaurants, shops and other activities that are open for business beyond nine-to-five, Monday through Friday. Week-end and evening hours are critical if the “active zone” of main street is to be active.
- The active zone has no off-street parking between the street and the primary business building.

- To be a “third place”, the length of the active zone must be compact to create an intimate setting. The nine towns have active zones ranging from 350’ to 2,600’. The heart of the range is 1,000’ to 2,000’.

Main Street	Blocks	Active Zone
Clermont	4	2,300’
DeLand	6	2,000’
Eustis	2	650’
Kissimmee	5	1,750’
Mount Dora	2	650’
Sanford	6	2,000’
Tavares	6	2,100’
Winter Garden	5	1,800’
Winter Park	8	2,600’

Source: wck | planning

ACTIVE ZONE INFRASTRUCTURE.

The presence of a 2-4 block-long section of main street with 2-3 story buildings, even when fully occupied, does not make a successful downtown. People make main street work, e.g., residents, employees and visitors. Once downtown, the activity must offer good value for people to come and return to main street.



As William Whyte discussed in his book *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, there must be food and beverage places, shops, outdoor seating, weather protection, lights, signs and furniture that let people linger, relax, enjoy the space and their companions.

Places for children are more commonly found in the company of their parents at restaurants and other entertainment venues. Dogs are evermore present.

A diversity of spaces, people, activities and housing helps make downtowns and main streets places where people go when not at work or at home. Downtowns can become the “ultimate third place” that mitigates the isolation inherent in the digital world.



Downtowns and main streets will prosper as they cater to people, families with children, adults with dogs, active seniors and visitors of all stripes. Wide sidewalks, benches, street lights, wayfinding, street trees, flowers, parks and plazas, convenient parking and active businesses create an inviting atmosphere. Concentrating these uses within an “active zone” of only a few blocks in length will intensify people’s interest and participation.



CONCLUSIONS on Character Main Streets.

1. The preponderance of buildings on character main streets have 2-3 stories. One story buildings and 4+ story buildings should be discouraged.
2. The number of blocks in the Active Zones varies, but the typical length is some 2,000 feet long with 4 to 6 block faces of active retail, restaurant, civic and public venues. Don’t disperse or interrupt the energy.
3. Civic buildings and public venues belong on or near the main street. Public and private offices not open nights and weekends should be located near or at the end of the Active Zone so not to interrupt the flow of evening and weekend downtown diners and shoppers with closed, dark storefronts.
4. Historic neighborhoods within walking distance of main street can be connected with well-lit and safe bike/ pedways.
5. Over half of the character downtowns have apartments, townhouses or condominiums within walking distance of the main street.
6. “Active Zone” businesses can be offered certain benefits not available to those outside, like special taxing districts to fund amenities, master parking systems, local business marketing programs and other activities to support **active zone** businesses.

Attachment - New Downtown Retail and Restaurant Site Design Factors.

The “Active Zone” of Shops and Restaurants.

Whether you are worried about the new normal, returning to the old normal or figuring out the expected hybrid, the future of the downtown in every small city and town will depend on the continuity of successful retail and restaurant businesses; usually small and locally owned. Given the continuing experience of 2020 and the expectation that there are more pandemics to come, how do we protect main street businesses; what do we know that will drive the future?

Small businesses of all types are fragile. Slight changes have big consequences. Care needs to be taken when tinkering with the traditional formula of window signs, comfortable sidewalks, on-street parking and well-lit streets for extended hours shopping and dining and a continuity of successful businesses in downtown’s “Active Zone”.

Remember, the Active Zone is that block, or two blocks or maybe three where storefronts open directly to sidewalks adjacent to on-street parking spaces; the core of downtown’s retail/restaurant district. The Active Zone usually has businesses on both sides of the main street. The Active Zone is a walkable, continuous, easily navigated main street where people may visit more than one destination on a single trip. Anchor stores are located strategically in the Active Zone. Downtown “third places” are located on or near the Active Zone.

Retail shops in the “Active Zone” have specific needs.

- First, they rely on **the image and power of main street** as their location identifier. An interesting main street with a protected Active Zone is important to every downtown shop and restaurant.
- Second, they need visible, accessible, convenient and safe **parking**. On-street parking is a must even if shoppers end up in a back-of-store lot once they cannot find a space on the street. Preserving on-street parking for customers is hard given the “entitlements” shop owners and employees feel for these ultra-convenient spots.
- Third, the **accoutrements of a safe and inviting setting** are signs, street lights and sidewalks with benches, plants and merchandise displays; all of which set the mood for attracting and protecting daytime and after hours shoppers. Storefront pick-up zones will become more common.

Restaurants have similar needs plus others specific to restaurants. In addition to the factors mentioned for shops, restaurants will require spaces for outdoor seating, zones for take-out pick-up and, more and more, drive-through lanes.

- **Outdoor seating** has grown in popularity over the past few years. With the pandemic, the demand soared. With future pandemics predicted, this is a sustainability feature for main street restaurants as well as all others in the city.

- Sidewalk seating is inviting to diners, especially if all-weather features are provided.
- Sidewalk seating even when the pedestrian lanes are between the seating and the restaurant still works.
- Across the street seating, in a park, seems extreme but is very effective in the right setting and on the right streets.
- Side-yards work well, especially on corner lots.
- **Zones for customers to pick up** take-out orders will continue to be in demand. The “battle for the curb”, written about by many others, is real as the use of the curb intensifies. What was once a competition between cars and buses has now expanded to include a variety of car-related demands; not to mention the interface with bike lanes and dedicated bus lanes.
- On-street parking spaces must be reserved for customers that enter the store or restaurants to pick-up their meal or goods. Parking spaces must also be reserved for in-car delivery from the restaurant or store. Employee safety is important.
- **Drive-thru lanes** are useful, effective and in high demand by both customers and restaurant operators. While they are great and need to be downtown, **they cannot be in the Active Zone on the core retail/restaurant blocks of downtown** unless the drive-thru lanes are in the back parking lot with no access to main street...tough but important to the integrity of the Active Zone on main street.

“Pop-ups” offer a new twist to a static setting. Examples abound in large and small cities around the Nation. Pop-up stores appear in storefronts that are temporarily vacant. Pop-up restaurants appear in parks, roof-tops and other “funky” spaces that have appeal because of their quiriness not their long-term prospects. Pop-up parks and coffee bars appear in main street parking spaces. They are temporary, they are unusual, they are designed with extreme safety in mind and they add to the character of the main street Active Zone.

Food trucks are similar but different. Zones or places for food trucks is another challenge for main street. They are best located in existing parking lots, parks or interstitial spaces that are safe for pedestrians and passing auto travelers who stop for a sample. Food trucks in the Active Zones are generally not a good idea unless specific sideyard parking areas or open areas are available. Locations near but not in the Active Zone are best.

Regulations and infrastructure can anticipate this situation. As conflicting needs arise, the basic principle is the preservation of the main street Active Zone. With that “stake in the ground”, customers, entrepreneurs and city officials will figure out creative and effective ways to address new conditions of more outside dining and more take-out goods and meals.

Proper infrastructure and design standards can anticipate this new normal before the intensity of demand arises. This is more comfortable for all parties. Historic downtowns have absorbed the transition from horses to trolleys to cars; they can adapt to the new conditions by balancing their character and economic vibrance.