

Starting a Village Center in a Greenfield Town.

5.7.24

THE VISION is a mixed-use village center in a greenfield community. The idea is to envision a built-out village center with shops, restaurants, cafes, parks, churches and schools along a two-block long main street. Main street connects to a bigger, exterior road and has an intersection with four corners of buildings and open space a block from the exterior road. Every character town started from nothing and became something elegant. So, how did that happen and why can't it happen again? Read on.

Language.

First, let's talk "greenfield". All new development takes place as infill in an existing urban or suburban setting, or on a vacant parcel at the edge of the urbanized area. Farms, fields and pastures become places where people live and learn, work and play. Sometimes they are ugly and dysfunctional; sometimes they are worthy of hosting the lives of families and businesses. But, they all start with a clean slate, a greenfield property.

Next, let's talk urbanism. Greenfield urbanism is an oxymoron to many, but since a substantial portion of new housing, perhaps most new housing, is built by national builders on greenfield sites at the edge of the urban area, why deny the future residents the benefits promoted by new urbanism: connectivity, walkability, sustainability and livability. All these "abilities" can be manifested in greenfield communities; different from urban neighborhoods, infill developments and adaptive reuses, but valid nonetheless.

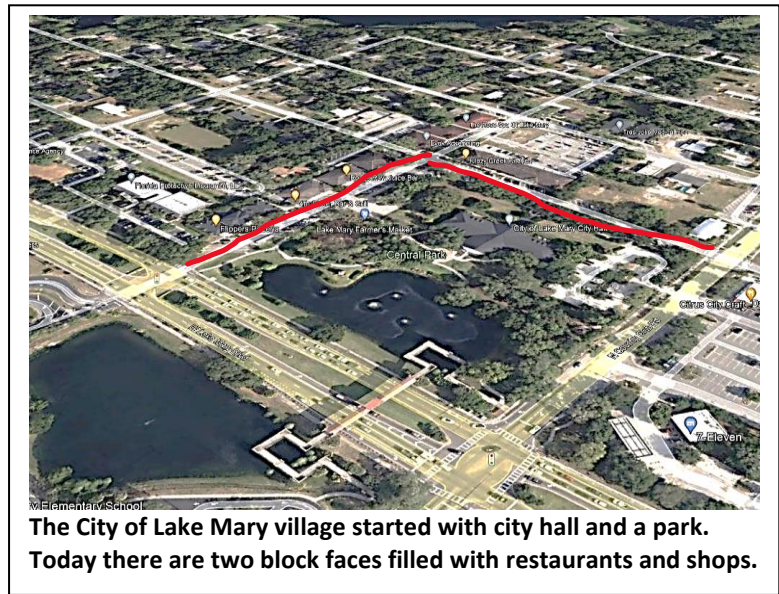
The language of greenfield urbanism is simple. In addition to greenfield and urbanism consider:

- There are "residential areas" surrounding the mixed-use center, almost always single-family homes of varying sizes, shapes and prices. While a variety in the housing stock is desirable, most new residential communities are targeted to a narrow part of the market, whatever that is.
- The "mixed-use center" can be called a village, a hub, a node, a core, a neighborhood or community center or any of the more fashionable marketing terms. At the end of the day, we'll call it a "village" or village center since it is small scale and approachable with a mix of uses and activities. Being human scale, it hopefully has some social, economic and physical character.
- A "connector" road is a roadway outside the greenfield community, usually on the periphery. The connector road, traditionally referred to as a collector or arterial roadway, actually connects several nearby residential communities with each other and the regional transportation system.

So, terminology wise, we have residential areas, small, mixed-use villages and connector streets or roads. Additionally, there is parks and open space, bike/pedways, civic uses and activities plus unique features that may include water, stormwater ponds, parking fields, wetlands, unique natural features or historic resources. These form the palette of uses the community designer has to use in response to the economic and social needs of the client/owner, the future residents, the village businesses and the community at large.

LOCATING THE VILLAGE CENTER.

Let's get to it. The residential areas on the periphery of the village are simple to envision. They have single-family homes of varying sizes along streets connected with bike/pedways, sprinkled with parks and open spaces, lit with night-sky sensitive street lamps laced with ample street trees. The village is traditionally in the center of the residential area; the village is where the action is. The community designer gets to decide, initially, where and how the village will emerge with sustainable commercial enterprises along a main street that becomes "third places" for the community.



First, the village has to be properly located. The experience of several large [1000+/- acre] PUDs in Central Florida is instructive. Designed in the early 1970's they succumbed to the idea of having the village centrally located within the residential area connected by walkways and bike paths. Good thinking...a central location is the closest location to the maximum number of residents. Mostly they started strong with master developer support and then failed.



They failed because they could not overcome their poor location which is inconsistent with the well-defined site location standards of the commercial real estate world. There were not enough customers in the PUD to support the village commerce, no matter how large the residential community. And of course, the village center could not provide the full range of goods and services offered by larger shopping centers. At the end of the day, residents may have patronized the village merchants, but their shopping efforts were not sufficient to support them.

Then came the second generation of village developers, or maybe the third, amended the PUD and moved the village center to the edge of the community adjacent to the peripheral connector road.

This move to the edge accomplished three things. First it positioned the village in a place that was still accessible to community residents; and also to customers in adjacent communities; and those passing by on the connector road. Second, it allowed a second chance to design the village properly by conflating the ideas of the recently proclaimed new urbanism with standard commercial real estate “rules”.

The main street in the village is perpendicular to the connector road; as in the City of Lake Mary, Park Avenue in Winter Park, the main street in the Winter Park Village and Brevard Ave in Cocoa Village. Third, the new villages could respond to the residential community that by this time was partially or mostly developed. More customers were in the market area. With these advantages, the new villages were relocated, redesigned and re-invigorated as successful village centers. New towns also offer examples of village main streets perpendicular to the connector road.

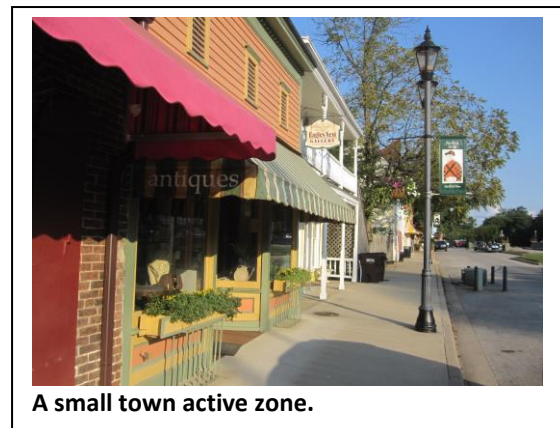
DESIGNING THE VILLAGE CENTER.

The “active zone” is the length along the main street that hosts commercial and civic businesses that are open during the day, in the evening and on week-ends. Store fronts on main street need to be as actively managed as cereals on the grocery store shelf. Space is limited and each occupant must add to the success of the village center by being a successful activity in the active zone.

The active zone is also the attractive zone; it attracts people to the village center from 7 am to 9 or 10 pm seven days of the week. Potential customers do not have to guess whether or not their favorite shop is opened for them; they can depend on their local merchants to be ready.

The active zone can also serve as the community’s “third place”. The third place is the place between home and work; the place where people go to relax, to meet neighbors and to socialize. The café, the bar, the hardware store or the library are places where people go without agendas or ambitious expectations.

The active zone, by definition, is on the village center’s main street. As noted above, the village main street cannot be the connector road. The village center is not a small, strip center on a thoroughfare. Still, the main street shops and activities need to be visible from the connector road; perpendicular is the answer. The village center main street can be at a signal controlled intersection on the connector road. Being perpendicular provides visibility and access without the disruption of being directly on a more heavily travelled road.



A small town active zone.

Signs, building locations, parking and landscaping are critical to attract customers without overwhelming the village center's main street. Success may bring congestion, but good planning and design can make this tolerable; and remember, traffic represents customers who patronize the village shops and keeps them in business.

Ideally, the 100% corner in the village center is one block into the village center; one block away from the signalized intersection of main street and the connector road. This focus of the village center is internalized while still being visible and accessible from the external road system.

An easy determination of the limits of the active zone in any small city downtown is to see where parking starts to appear between the stores and the street. The active zone has storefront sidewalks, on-street parking, landscape and such...no off-street parking between the buildings and the street. As one travels further away from the active zone, parking fields between the buildings and the street appear...you have left the prime commercial area of the village center or the small city downtown.

The palette of uses presented above includes:

- **Commercial uses** and activities: restaurants, cafes, retail shops with clothing, bicycles, antiques and furniture, hardware, books, medical services, animal care plus specialty food shops for ice cream, donuts and pizza. A grocery store would be nice but depends on the village center's location and the size of the residential market area. Likewise, a hotel would be great but perhaps a B&B would suffice. Most of these uses are eligible to be located on main street in the active zone. Others, like banks and offices with restricted hours fit better on side streets.
- **Natural and historic resources** provide unique features that may include an historic home, a statue, a waterfront or more mundane but necessary uses such as stormwater ponds and parking fields.

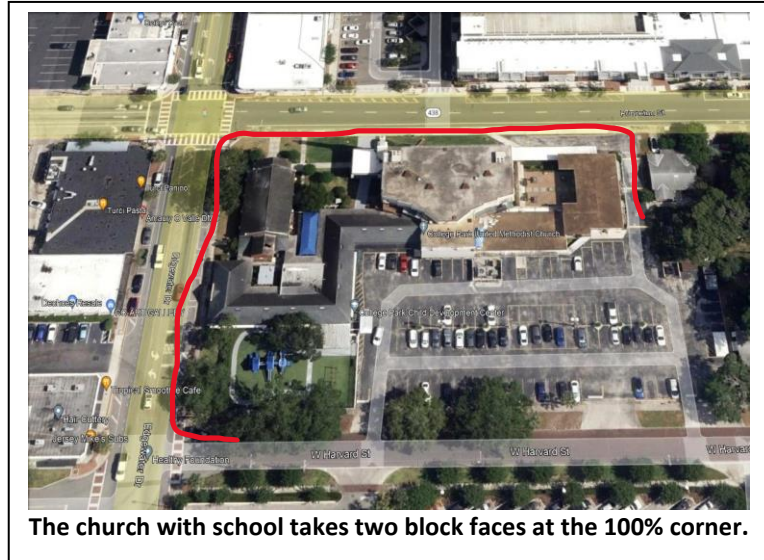


Build new "old" small buildings.



Farmers' markets are great starter businesses.

- **Civic and cultural uses** must abound. Parks, plazas and open spaces, bike/pedways, libraries, museums, schools, churches, theaters, galleries and other civic and cultural uses are important players. Most village centers are too small for the more regional uses, but occasionally one will seek a small village center venue and this opportunity should be hardily pursued.



The church with school takes two block faces at the 100% corner.

These form the palette of uses the community designer has to use in response to the economic and social needs of the client/owner, the future residents, the village businesses and the community at large. In most cases, the pioneering tenants for the stores and offices in the village center will need to be recruited, perhaps subsidized.

Parking, on street, off street behind active zone shops, is critical. Even with a ubiquitous presence of walkways, bikeways, golf carts and newer forms of personal motorized travel, many people will still drive to the village center be they residents, passing-by travelers or folks from nearby communities.

- On-street parking for customers is important as a service and a buffer between the sidewalks and the street.
- Off-street parking must be visible, plentiful, handicap-friendly and accessible without being located along the active zone of the main village street.



A small town free-standing post office.

GETTING STATED WITH A GREENFIELD VILLAGE CENTER.

What comes first when building a village center in a greenfield community?

First, the village center has to be properly located as discussed above.

Second, civic and cultural institutions can be approached as potential occupants of the village center. Non-profit organizations are always seeking well-located cheap space. Subsidizing theaters, museums and the like for the first few years of village development may be useful with the pioneering institutions offered nearby space after the main street development objective is achieved. The provision of favorable land costs may be necessary to induce interest to become bricks and mortar.

Third, a park at the village center's 100% corner establishes the intent of the developer and the qualitative standard. The location of a church, perhaps with a school, adjacent to the park offers several advantages. The presence of the church helps with credibility and draws people to the village center. A church with a school does the same to a greater extent. The parking field for the church, not located on the main street, can be a resource for the active zone merchants. Shared facilities help both parties.



A village center park can be simple.

Fourth come some kind of food and beverage shops; a deli, a coffee shop, a café...on main street, at the 100% corner; perhaps initially subsidized by the master developer.

Fifth comes the services important to the residents. Dry cleaners, dentists, walk-in health clinics, animal care centers and bike shops all occupy small spaces, draw local customers and are always in high demand.

These pioneering merchants may be offered favorable investment opportunities, subsidized rents for the first few years or other incentives to locate in the village center. Nearby sites for re-location are part of the deal.



Find a unique user that needs a place.

National tenants are rarely pioneers. They need proof of the market before they act, and they find encouragement when local investors believe in the village center market. Once the market is proven, the problem switches to regulating the national vendors who have designs and ideas contrary to the founding concepts of the village center. Established standards early in the development process are helpful in preserving the character of the village center.

Sixth, the capital improvement budgets of the local jurisdictions can be mined to find facilities the governments plan to build in the next few years. Branch libraries, health clinics and various decentralized service centers may be in the offing. The transit authority, school board and state agency budgets should also be consulted. Regional trails and parks may be planned for the vicinity.

Seventh, establish a trailhead for the regional trail system in the village center. Encourage the regional trail to come to the village center.

CONCLUSIONS.

The initial objective is to find occupants for four new buildings...one on each corner of the 100% intersection in the village center; or perhaps a few storefronts along a block face across from the park, church or school. The several scenarios present above need not happen sequentially. In fact, the search for all seven can proceed simultaneously. Who knows which group of pioneers will be first?

The trick is to have a good location, a good design for the village center, plenty of residents in the nearby surrounding area and high quality development standards that are not compromised for short term gain. Plan for success; for sustainable success of a greenfield urban village.

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Be known for something.



Ace is found in many small town village centers.