

High Performance Development Corridors

Transforming Blighted Commercial Strips into Productive Multi-Use Districts

THE THING ABOUT COMMERCIAL “STRIPS”.

First, let’s be clear about our subject. The corridors of which we speak are roadways with blight strewn along the sides in the form of marginal businesses, uninviting restaurants, vacant and poorly maintained buildings, a wide array of signs, excessive driveway cuts and disorganized parking lots with too few trees.

They are ugly to view, dangerous to drive and unproductive generators of revenues for residents, businesses and the city. They are generally poor contributors to the city’s economic and employment base.

More importantly, their poor economic performance is a drag on the psyche of the community. The obviously blighted strips represent the values of the host community to everyone passing through, residents and visitors.

Commercial strips have generally been neglected, relegated as an area of town where anything goes, even when the “strip” is in the middle of town. Commercial strips are one of the last bastions of laissez-faire development in America: under-regulated, under-designed, under-valued, under-served and under-performing. Yet, they are highly visible; often serving as the front door to the community. They are “too big to completely fail” yet “too tough to tackle.”

The traditional role of the commercial strips in America is complex. Though ugly, dangerous and unproductive, they must have served a purpose once upon a time since we have so many of them. The economic value that led to their initial development can be used for the resurgence. Their locations are still great.

Characterization of Blighted Commercial Strips

Corridors usually accommodate:

- Regional traffic that creates congestion, but also provides customer visibility.
- Property access to roadside commercial including single family houses converted to commercial use, apartments, offices, “big boxes” and general commercial and industrial uses and activities; personal storage and flex space warehouses, high schools, car lots and other uses not acceptable elsewhere in the city.
- Utility corridors for swale drainage, stormwater ponds with chain-link fencing, electric and telephone lines.
- Signs displaying a wide variety of tastes; marginal and poorly maintained businesses, often with outside storage,

Corridors are, essentially, “free development zones” with:

- Wide ranging uses and activities arranged at random,
- Low, or no, development standards and design guidelines,
- No access control, interconnected parking areas or frontage roads,
- No visible interest in aesthetics through sign control, landscaping or site planning, and
- No organization like a merchants’ association or property owners’ association to foster a better idea.

Corridors have the potential for generating:

- Jobs and family incomes and
- Property tax and sales tax receipts for the city.

Source: wck | planning, inc.

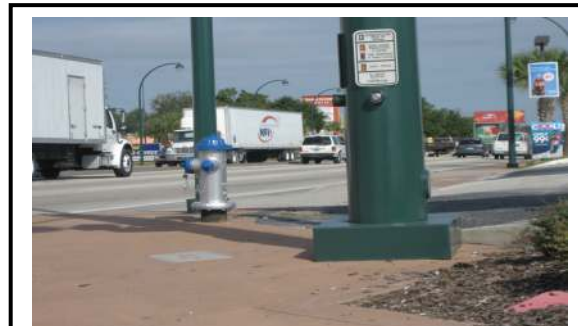
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A Basic Element of the City. Corridors are an essential element of every city; the only question is whether they are beautiful and economically productive, or not. Corridors are the connective tissue that accommodate regional traffic and connect the city's neighborhoods, mixed-use centers, single purpose specialty zones and open spaces.

The tools available to city leaders interested in improving the blighted condition on corridors are: community infrastructure, entitlement programs and open space systems supported by development standards and design guidelines. Community leaders, urban planners and developers know how to successfully use these tools to correct blight; they have been doing just such a thing in downtowns for decades.

Today's commercial strip is a distortion of the productive commercial corridor it was initially envisioned to be. Nobody intended to develop ugly, dangerous places in the heart of the city, but as downtowns lost their vigor, the highway commercial frontages were the most valuable lands in many towns. They were ravenously developed and succeeded until neglect and competition led to their current blighted, ugly, dangerous and under-performing state of being.



Pavers Don't Solve Every Problem.

Problems to Overcome. The practicalities of changing the bad dynamics of a blighted commercial strip are daunting. There are a thousand reasons why the effort will fail, but success comes from a determined program based on an effective approach as outlined below. The obstacles to overcome, to list but a few, are: un-motivated property owners, ineffective incentives, un-motivated local elected and appointed officials, weak economic and financial markets and general community apathy.

Accentuate the Positive. As revenue generators for governments, businesses and families, these heavily travelled corridors are valuable community assets, despite years of neglect and abuse. Their locations are generally superb and their underlying value proposition remains intact. The city's business model should demand more from them. To be more economically and socially productive, the corridors need to be beautiful, safe and inviting.

POTENTIALLY HIGH PERFORMING ASSETS.

The promise of existing corridors lies in their fundamental value. Commercial corridors are still critical as:

- connectors between neighborhoods and city centers,
- well-located, high traffic-count sites for businesses,
- generators of sales and property tax revenues for local governments,
- sources of jobs and family incomes and
- places where multiple uses, with proper standards and guidelines, can be located in a desirable setting.

Source: wck | planning, inc.

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HIGHWAY CORRIDORS AS HIGH-PERFORMING DEVELOPMENT DISTRICTS.

Establishment of a “district” is the driving idea behind the implementation of a plan for resurrecting an unorganized, blighted commercial strip into a productive multi-use development corridor; just like it happens downtown.

Districts that become high performers need several things to go right:

- The market needs to be strong.
- Infrastructure needs to be available.
- Intensities and densities of land use need to be easily increased with a broad mix of permitted uses including residential uses.

Additionally, a sensitive approach to “grandfather” issues needs to be in place for older sites that do not, and cannot, meet newer codes such as parking and stormwater management. City government must be committed to better quality development to protect the “pioneers” who invest in the district with higher standards from being dragged back into a blighted setting by future waivers under pressure from existing owners.

Reasonable standards for enhanced site planning, signage and landscaping need to lead to improvements without becoming onerous. Strict code enforcement is essential.

Characteristics of a High Performance “District”

The essential characteristics of a high performing district are:

1. A multiplicity of engaged stakeholders: property owner, private and public,
2. A common vision, theme or purpose that binds together most or all entities in the district,
3. A community-wide recognition that the district exists,
4. Identifiable borders, gateways and edges to the district that can be specifically defined,
5. A generally accepted name commonly used in the community to identify the district, and
6. A consensus among the stakeholders that the resources and activities in the district require some level of management.

Characteristics sometimes present within high performing districts are:

7. Aesthetic consistency with design standards for landscaping, signs and graphics,
8. Internally cohesive transportation systems for vehicles, parking, pedestrians, bikes, buses and trams,
9. District-wide communication networks with websites, newsletters, meetings and events,
10. Recurring funding, taxation or fee-based systems for district maintenance and operations,
11. Centralized management, with an organization to work on issues of common interest: security and emergency management; stormwater management, parking and wayfinding systems; streets, transit, pedways, bikeways and tram systems; parks and open spaces; trees and beautification; energy and water conservation; information technology, marketing and communication systems.

Source: wck | planning, inc.

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APPROACHES TO REDEVELOPMENT

The trick is to transform a blighted commercial strip into a successful multiple use development corridor that performs its functions by providing business, civic and housing sites that warrant investment and contribute to the prosperity of the host city.

The two key ingredients for successful redevelopment are infrastructure and entitlements.

- **Infrastructure** is essential for new construction and rehabilitations. Funding is the driver for the infrastructure improvement program.
- **Entitlements** dictate what uses can be included in the redevelopment scheme and how they must be designed. In general, the range of uses must be broad and the standards for development must be tight.

Beauty is always a plus. Trees are the main element of any beautification program. Saving existing trees and planting new ones is an incredibly important and productive investment.

Community leaders, planners and developers know how to achieve this outcome. Their experiences with neighborhood and downtown planning and development are directly transferable to planning and redeveloping multi-use corridors. Neighborhood and downtown planning techniques are directly applicable to corridor redevelopment planning.

The Urban Land Institute's Ten Principles for Reinventing America's Suburban Strips is a great place to start. The authors, Messrs. Beyard and Pawlukiewicz, have taken the concepts used in downtown redevelopment and applied them to strip commercial corridors.

ULI's Ten Principles for Reinventing America's Suburban Strips

1. Ignite Leadership and Nurture Partnerships
2. Anticipate Evolution
3. Know the Market
4. Prune Back Retail-Zoned Land
5. Establish Pulse Nodes of Development
6. Tame the Traffic
7. Create the Place
8. Diversify the Character
9. Eradicate the Ugliness
10. Put Your Money (and Regulations) Where Your Policy Is

Source: *Ten Principles for Reinventing America's Suburban Strips*, by Michael D. Beyard and Michael Pawlukiewicz, published by the Urban Land Institute.

The **Main Street Program** offers a supplemental process to contribute to the desired outcome. Their formula of organization, promotion, design and economic organization is a proven method to invigorate merchants and downtown property owners with a spirit of rejuvenation. This same technique can be used on blighted strip commercial zones, as described below.

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The Main Street Program

Approach – As a unique economic development tool, the Main Street Four Point Approach[®] is the foundation for local initiatives to revitalize districts by leveraging local assets – from cultural or architectural heritage to local enterprises and community pride. The four points of the Main Street program that work together to build a sustainable and complete community revitalization effort are:

- Organization
- Promotion
- Design
- Economic restructuring

Coincidentally, the four points of the Main Street Program correspond with the four forces of real estate value, which are social, political, physical and economic.

Source: National Trust for Historic Preservation.

PAS #418, “Designing Urban Corridors”. The literature that addresses the needs of urban corridors is sparse. The classic study was published in 1989 by Kirk Bishop by the APA Planning Advisory Service [PAS], entitled “Designing Urban Corridors”. Other references are listed below. The paucity of studies reflects the general neglect of the subject which reflects the general neglect of the resource – the corridors themselves.



Reinvestment Opportunity

Designing Urban Corridors

Kirk R. Bishop produced *Designing Urban Corridors* in 1989 just as the movement towards mixed-use urban development emerged along with the growing appreciation for the mutual dependency of transportation and land use planning. The founding of CNU was still four years in the future. Mr. Bishop’s work was forward thinking and practical as he put forth “general and specific techniques [that] can be effectively used to improve or preserve the character of corridors.” His recommendations:

- Think big, but begin with a focus.
- Don’t cast too many stones until your own house is in order.
- Remove regulatory barriers that impede innovative site design and land-use planning.
- Be firm about goals and flexible about how to attain them.
- Adopt a street tree program.
- Don’t ignore the relationship between traffic circulation and land use.

Source: *Designing Urban Corridors*, Kirk R. Bishop, American Planning Association; PAS Report Number 418, 1989.

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PAS EIP – 29, Commercial Corridor

Revitalization is a PAS provided packet of articles and documents from its library on specific subjects such as this one on Commercial Corridor Revitalization. This packet includes five articles, four guidebooks, five corridor revitalization plans, three form-based codes and six corridor overlay zoning codes. The references are cited in the last section on Readings. Each article and document is very comprehensive and covers the full range of issues one would expect.

Comprehensive Long-Range Finance Planning

is a critical early step in the redevelopment process. This planning can happen concurrent with the Community Redevelopment Agency [CRA] work, but it is not the same.

Establish a CRA to provide an organization and tax increments as one source of funding; there are others. The long range, comprehensive finance plan examines all existing and potential sources and uses of funds, leave nothing off the table:

- Tax increment funds and other special overlay taxing districts,
- Impact fees and credits,
- Developer funding and donations of property, such as right-of-way and
- Funding from state and federal agencies through special grants or general expenditures.

This strategic piece puts together the existing and potential funding sources with the infrastructure costs. The strategy can then evolve to produce a sustainable flow of multi-

year redevelopment funds for programmed infrastructure, property acquisition and administration.

Development Entitlements are of equal importance as funding for infrastructure. Encouraging re-investment entails offering access to market uses through future land use designations and zoning uses. In general:

- **Uses** should be broadly defined to include housing, retail, offices, civic buildings and institutional activities, such as hospitals, libraries, museums, colleges and universities. Uses are not as important to regulate as is design.
- **Development Standards** set minimums for the provision of services and facilities associated with development. The standard should be the standard requirements necessary for community health, safety, welfare and appearance. Deviations from these standards should be scrutinized closely. Every waiver sets the new standard for others; usually at a lower level.
- **Design Guidelines** set the tone for architecture, landscape architecture and site engineering.



A Great Location; Just Full of Junk.

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CONCLUSIONS

- 1. Know the market:** Infill and redevelopment are hard enough in a strong market. Know the economic environment, prepare in the slow times to be ready to act when conditions are favorable.
- 2. Protect adjacent neighborhoods:** This should be a priority of the City anyway, but from a corridor redevelopment perspective, garner neighborhood support. Avoid publicly fighting about every new corridor investment. Set the stage for good projects to be well-received by nearby residents.
- 3. Identify stakeholders who become actively engaged, as leaders:** The stakeholders must have an ambition to succeed; property owners and businesses in the district must feel they have something material at stake in the improvement of conditions on the “strip” that propels them into action. The City, CRA or other outside entity cannot lead the effort; they can actively and meaningfully support, but they cannot lead.
- 4. Create organization:** The stakeholders need an organization that represents their interests. While the City may be supportive, the City has many other things to do. A district-specific organization with stakeholder leadership can speak for the interests of the district regarding entitlements, infrastructure, funding, code enforcement, and economic development.
- 5. Identify a distinct district:** The amorphous “strip” has to become an identifiable entity. Designation of a portion of the strip as a “district” with boundaries and specific stakeholders is critical.
- 6. Unified development planning:** Approach the multi-owner district as a single entity; consider the district as a Planned Unit Development – one entity with a mix of owners and uses with coordinated and funded entitlements, infrastructure, management and marketing.
- 7. Leverage city and other outside support:** The local government can help a few stakeholders get organized. Leverage public investment by using matching grants to prompt private investment. But, the city should not give public money away without private financial participation, however modest. A CRA tax increment program should follow enactment of a special district tax that generates new money.
- 8. Think diversity and integration:** Diversity is the key to prosperity through enabling the development of a mix of uses, multiple modes of travel, shared parking and a wide variety of housing types and prices. Total integration of all open spaces is important.
- 9. Take meaningful action, early and often:** Cosmetic improvements, in and of themselves, are not enough, but they create initial attention until substantive improvements are made.
- 10. Think comprehensively and long term:** Complete a long-range comprehensive plan that solidifies the vision, institutionalizes the organization and a funding source.
- 11. Beauty always matters:** Simplify, organize and beautify the physical setting through landscaping, sign de-cluttering, organized parking and a simple system of circulation.

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The Process for Transforming Blighted Commercial Strips into Productive Multi-Use Development Corridors

1. **Someone Takes a Chance:** Someone who cares to change the status quo must step forward. It can be a property owner or a business owner in the district. A group of two or three ambitious people is better than a single missionary. The city cannot be the leader; it must support but it cannot lead. The process has to start with someone who is on a mission to stake out a better future.
2. **Express a Vision:** The leader will have a mission, a vision; a story about a different future. The city can provide early support by preparing a sketch plan that graphically presents the stakeholders' vision for the corridor. A drawing is really helpful to engage people in a community conversation on the future of their surroundings. Anticipate development standards and design guidelines.
3. **Broaden "Stakeholder" Participation:** The initial leadership group identifies and recruits additional people who also have a stake in the future of the corridor – property owners, business owners, city officials, utility companies, and other interested groups. Broader based groups have more power.
4. **Organize:** The broadened stakeholder group establishes an "Exploratory Committee" of 5 to 7 interested leaders, endorsed by the city, to set a participatory process in motion for the "stakeholders" and the city.
5. **Find Start-up Money:** Initial financial support for the Exploratory Committee is critical. Loans or grants from interested parties matched by the city are an option. Total public funding sets the wrong tone for a stakeholder-driven process.
6. **Scope the Work:** To initiate community discussions and articulate a direction for the transformation of the commercial strip into a productive urban corridor:
 - Identify the preliminary boundaries of the corridor that will form the "district",
 - Solidify the participation of stakeholders and facilitate their active participation,
 - Develop an initial consensus vision for rejuvenating the district based on "all call" meetings of stakeholders,
 - Secure continuing funding for the permanent organization's operations, and
 - Develop concepts for the district long-range finance plan at the start.
7. **Form a Permanent Organization:**
 - Establish a permanent committee or board sanctioned by the host city government,
 - Establish committee bylaws, and
 - Communicate, constantly, with all district stakeholders.
8. **Prepare a District Redevelopment Plan:**
 - Understand the existing and potential market for goods and services offered in the District,
 - Prepare a future land use and circulation plan with development standards for the District,
 - Align the comprehensive plan, land development regulations, development guidelines and design standards to support redevelopment,
 - Prepare a Comprehensive Long-Range Finance Plan for the district that identifies sources and uses of funds necessary to support redevelopment activities of existing businesses and new development, and
 - Develop marketing programs to recruit new businesses along with financial, infrastructure and processing incentives to encourage the appropriate private investment in the District.
9. **Appreciate and Leverage the power of beauty.**

Source: wck | planning, inc.

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READINGS:

Most of the work done on corridors and commercial strips is found in reports of specific corridors for cities and counties across America; however, there is some literature, as follows:

- **“Great Places Stuck in No Place at All, It’s Time to Fix the Energy Leak Inherent in Our Conventional Retail Centers”**; Joe Nickol, AICP, Planning, July 2012.
- **“PAS EIP – 29, Commercial Corridor Revitalization”**; PAS provides packets of articles and documents from its library on specific subjects such as this one on Commercial Corridor Revitalization, May 2011. This packet includes five articles, four guidebooks, five corridor revitalization plans, three form-based codes and six corridor overlay zoning codes. Three references were specifically used in this paper as cited individually in this section on Readings.
- **“Rezoning Urban Retail Strips to Create Neighborhood Centers”**; Tom Smith published in Zoning Practice, April 2011 [included in PAS EIN – 29].
- **Columbia Pike Initiative, A Revitalization Plan – Update**; Arlington County Board (Virginia), 2003 [included in PAS EIN – 29].
- **Designing Urban Corridors**; Kirk R. Bishop, Planning Advisory Service Report Number 418, American Planning Association, 1989.
- **Fixing Broken Cities: The Implementation of Urban Development Strategies**; John Kromer (Aug 2, 2009), Taylor & Francis [Routledge], NY, 2010.
- **Redesigning Cities, Principles, Practice, Implementation**; Jonathan Barnett, Published by APA Planners Press, 2008.
- **Retrofitting Suburbia, Urban Design Solutions for Redesigning Suburbs**, Ellen Dunham-Jones, June Williamson, John Wiley & Sons, Inc, New Jersey, 2009.
- **Shaping Contemporary Suburbia, Perspectives on Development Control in Metropolitan Chicago**; Joseph Schwieterman, Martin Toth, Published by Index Publishing, 2001.
- **Strategic Planning in Local Government, A Casebook**; edited by Roger L. Kemp, Planners Press, American Planning Association, 1992.
- **Strip Corridor Redevelopment, A Guidance Document**; prepared by the Land Use Clinic at the University of Georgia, 2004 [included in PAS EIN–29].
- **Ten Principles for Reinventing America’s Suburban Strips**; Messrs. Michael D. Beyard and Michael Pawlukiewicz, published by Urban Land Institute, 2001.

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Note: This article was published in an edited form entitled Lessons for “Transforming Blighted Strips into Productive Corridors” in **Practicing Planner**, Summer 2013.