

The Social Infrastructure Aspiration of the City's General Plan

Leveraging Physical Assets to Create Community Civility and Sociability

VISION

The vision of most small cities and towns in America, however expressed, is to be a pleasant and prosperous place to live and do business. They aspire to have a strong social infrastructure system with:

- Pleasantness which implies a place that is safe, healthy, educated, beautiful and civil with sound neighborhoods, schools, parks and businesses.
- Prosperity which depends on jobs with livable wages, public revenues from reasonable taxes and fees and an economic base that provides stability.

STRATEGY

The strategy for maintaining, enhancing or creating a pleasant and prosperous place relies on the alignment and integration of the city's economic, social and physical resources. Sustainable systems reinforce each other to complete the city and engage its citizens with a sense of belonging, a sense of continuity, a sense of ownership, and a sense of responsibility for the "the greater good." A complete, livable community has a comfortable and equitable balance of the physical, economic and social aspects of life.

The strategy is to build and sustain strong neighborhoods, strong businesses and progressive government with socialization and civility **programs**, community **partnerships** and **facilities** designed to promote socialization. The challenge for city planners is to use physical planning and design skills to promote economic development and civic sociability.



Publicly Accessible Buildings provide Space for Volunteer Workshops.



A Monthly Street Market.



Performances in Public Places.

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SUSTAINING SOCIABLE COMMUNITIES.

Cities, established and new, seek to balance the interaction of their physical, economic and social forces. Thoughtful physical design plays an important role in advancing the city's inherent framework for the city's economic and social life.

1. Social Features.

Physical facilities designed with socialization in mind encourage civic engagement, volunteerism and "ownership" of the public realm with settings that demand and encourage face-to-face exchanges. Physical assets that enable and encourage social behavior are plazas, parks, public seating areas, active streets, cafes, restaurants with outdoor seating and casual gathering places in neighborhoods and "villages". Beauty is a powerful socializer.

2. Economic Features.

City cultural and recreation venues play two roles in economic development programs that increase family incomes and jobs. The first is to use the social and cultural value of a town to keep and attract employers; the second is that an interesting town with jobs and a strong socialization atmosphere keeps younger people in town, while attracting others.

3. Physical Features.

Neighborhoods, can host a full spectrum of housing types and prices, along with parks, schools and community centers. Mixed-use centers are fine places for socialization and business activity. Urban infrastructure and urban open space complete the physical environment that supports the city.



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EXAMPLES OF PHYSICAL ASSETS THAT ENHANCE SOCIAL CAPITAL

- 1. Outdoor spaces** such as streets, parks, patios, porches, plazas and gardens are often offered by private and public groups for one-time or serial use for health and education classes, service club meetings and community events; and the public.
- 2. Transportation Center** is a terrific case of a physical facility that serves to build community social capital. Centers have bus stops, transit centers, rental cars, taxis, shuttles, auto service, ride sharing and bike repair; anything one needs for mobility.
- 3. Life-long Learning Venues** generally located at public schools, colleges or other venues offer educational events that are growing in demand as the pace of human knowledge growth quickens, as jobs become more demanding and as people have more leisure time to devote to learning.
- 4. Meeting Spaces**, private and public, with community rooms, auditoriums, offices or other spaces are often made available for:
 - Arts, Theater or Garden Clubs,
 - A Business Education Center or Incubator with a community jobs clearinghouse for temporary or part-time work,
 - A Volunteer Clearinghouse for Meals on Wheels, school crossing guards, neighborhood watch, visiting nurses, and youth sports coaching,
 - A Pet Center for the care, training and boarding of animals, and
 - Community Education programs on health and safety.
- 5. Complete Streets** that encourage walking, playing and enjoyment of an outdoor space with trees, flowers and a nice atmosphere.



A Central Plaza is a great Multi-Modal Transportation Center.

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STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES OF THE SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE ASPIRATION

Successful small cities, towns and new communities find ways to share the times of their lives. Community theaters, high school football, garden clubs, churches, post offices, pancake breakfasts, farmers' markets and town picnics create the opportunity for people and families to commune, to create and to share stories, to grow together.

As people spend time together, their successful co-habitation is based on the presumption that each will all abide by similar rules and customs of behavior. This presumption necessitates understandings reflected in strategic objectives within the City's General Plan with a Social Infrastructure Element designed to create strong community civility and socialization.

The Social Infrastructure Element's strategic objectives are more extensive, more emotional and more subtle than those of the Physical and Economic Elements. They rely on programs, partnerships and facilities. They include:

PROGRAMS

1. To foster mutual expectations. Successful communities have commonly held expectations that most members of the society will behave in a similar manner in terms of sociability and civility, i.e., friendliness, consideration, supervision of children, maintenance of homes and tolerance of diversity. To ensure that everyone's expectations are aligned, successful cities openly discuss visions and standards with stakeholders.



Plazas and Public Art; A Test of Community Values.

- 2. To promote broad-based respect for rules of behavior.** The community implicitly agrees to abide by the local ordinances, standards, restrictive covenants, rules and other agreed-upon ideas for behavior. This is essential in order to protect civic and private assets, to support public management and to govern.
- 3. To build trust.** Trust evolves through experiences based on the shared values of life, feelings of safety, security and freedom. Trust in community leaders is earned through years of working together.
- 4. To pursue a common interest in fun.** Cities with heart and soul also have humor and joy. Proud towns have a softness that exudes good humor. Serious towns have the confidence to lighten up. City pride is usually shown with a smile as the virtues of the hometown are shared.

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PARTNERSHIPS

5. **To celebrate shared rituals.** Practices repeated often enough become ingrained in community folk lore, such as, celebratory parades, holiday picnics and fireworks, art shows and sporting events. Rituals are the fiber of friendliness. Parades and jubilees express a friendly nature.
6. **To enhance the city's capacity for self-reliance.** Successful communities have or develop the capacity to solve problems, to fund physical and social infrastructure and the capacity to help one another in times of emergency. This capacity creates self-confidence that usually leads to better decisions, reduced tensions and increased community pride.
7. **To construct ubiquitous connections.** Successful cities have meaningful connections between residents, businesses and civic leaders. They come together in local community activities, neighborhood events and volunteer organizations. In character towns, everyone knows everyone.
8. **To enlighten governance.** The governance mechanism, public and private, is open, accountable and communicative.

FACILITIES

9. **To understand that public spaces matter.** Parks, public places, sidewalks, post offices, libraries and cafés all contribute to random, casual encounters that solidify connections.
10. **To insist upon respect for civic assets.** Schools, parks, community places and spaces demand respect and care that require consistent community attention and expense.

The Special Case of Private Government: Be Wary

The rules for effective private governments as they manage and operate the entitlement codes, financial systems and physical facilities of private communities are:

1. Governance needs to be a transparent and equitable organization that respects minority rights and the rule of law.
2. Governance organizations need to balance their role as agents for stability and agents of change.
3. Transparent and candid communication systems build trust in organizations since trust comes in two types:
 - generalized trust...trust in strangers.
 - particularized trust...trust in people we know.
4. Promote mixed use and "public" settings that inherently foster diversity and communication using these places for scheduled and random encounters.

Private governance systems approved by public entities must be carefully designed to avoid the abuse of powers regarding representation, regulation and taxation.



A Simple Small Stage Provides an Intimate Venue for Community Meetings and Performances.

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THE SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE ASPIRATION.

The Social Infrastructure Aspirational Plan identifies strategic-driven actions that include the programs and activities designed to create community spirit and hometown pride; and then to support these viscerally sensed activities through physical and economic elements of the City's General Plan.

1. **The Social Infrastructure Aspiration of the City's General Plan** contains six "elements" that define action programs and physical features to support sociability programs:

- **Inventory and assess the city's socialization assets.** Take stock of the city's social assets and activities such as:
 - activities of community and professional organizations and clubs including participation rates,
 - city education and recreation programs and facilities,
 - community policing experiences,
 - city, county and state programs for community health, drug and family abuse, teen-age pregnancy, Medicaid, participation in the National School Lunch Program and other social assistance programs.
- **Determine responsible agents** for enhancing each socialization challenge and opportunity by offering program directors and socialization agents access to the necessary assembly spaces.
- **Provide, directly or indirectly, leadership training** for community leaders and volunteers to engender the spirit of public service and civil behavior to their members and associates.

- **Provide, directly or indirectly, fund raising training** for philanthropic and volunteer organizations for methods such as crowd funding, direct solicitations and other approaches.
- **Provide, directly or indirectly, communications training** using traditional methods and all forms of social media to send and receive information and ideas.
- **Pre-designed processes and standards for private governance systems** such as mandatory homeowner and property owner groups.

2. **The Physical Development Aspiration of the City's General Plan** must include facilities and services that provide for the socialization needs of the city.

The physical development plan locates civic buildings, streets, ponds, parks, libraries, post offices and socialization-oriented amenities. Connections and beauty promote social capital formation and economic development. Mixed use centers, multi-use corridors and neighborhoods provide connections, places and spaces that reflect the needs of a social environment.

3. **The Economic Aspiration of the City's General Plan** has two "elements": a strong economic development plan, and a long-range, comprehensive finance plan for the city. Both are necessary to enhance the city's sociability and civility.

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A Model Process for Preparing The City's Social Infrastructure Aspiration

1. **Engage stakeholders at the start** of the social infrastructure planning and design process including civic and professional organizations, city and county programs and school board activities.
2. **Build a multi-disciplinary team with the full range of expertise** in the physical, social science and economic aspects of community planning, design, operations and maintenance to assure that social asset design leverages the city's economic and physical assets.
3. **Communicate early and often**, as if the success of the community depended on it. Establish reliable systems of personal, communal and electronic approaches to perpetuate the two-way conversation.
4. **Articulate and defend the city's vision** conjured up by the residents, business owners and others with a stake in the community's success. Meld "place" with "interest" by employing:
 - a. **Diversity in all things:** Diversify the general population, the housing stock, the mix of uses, the multiplicity of travel modes and the variety of natural habitat for plants and animals.
 - b. **Community amenities:** Provide open spaces, parks, cultural and educational places and public markets to accommodate a multiplicity of micro-events that promote sociability.
 - c. **Transparent and participatory community governance:** Engage citizens in activities and responsibilities to develop mutual aspirations, funding sources and communication systems.
 - d. **Beauty:** Demand beautiful places; they are more sociable and inspirational; they are more worthy of defense. Beauty is a powerful community-building tool.
5. **Deploy a Vision-Driven Strategy with social and civic values driving the City's General Plan.**
 - a. **Prepare a Social Infrastructure Aspirational Plan** that is comprehensive and aggressive with activities and events that promote community values.
 - b. **Get social outcomes from physical improvements** and facilities; design places, spaces, buildings, neighborhoods, infrastructure and amenities that accommodate, encourage and enable positive social and economic outcomes. Remember, physical amenities are just vessels for the activities and programs that engage people...all people, today and tomorrow.
 - c. **Recognize that economic development is essential for the development of social capital.**
 - d. **Construct funding and financial systems**, from the outset, that are reliable sources to support civic infrastructure and its perpetuation. This is foundational. Disputes over money are destructive.
6. **Be a "serious community".** A "serious" community is a city with people who are trying to build a pleasant and prosperous place to live for themselves, their families, their neighbors and their descendants.
 - a. Find, study, appreciate, and emulate other "Serious Communities",
 - b. Conversely, reject "communities of opportunity" where people view their homes and businesses merely as short-term real estate investments, places that tolerate "all take and no give", places where social capital is being diminished rather than accumulated.
 - c. Take the work seriously, for it is serious work.
 - d. **Make beauty and fun foundations of the city.**

Source: wckplanning.com

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CONCLUSIONS: LESSONS FOR LEVERAGING PHYSICAL AND ECONOMIC ASSETS TO PROMOTE THE COMMUNITY'S SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE ASPIRATION

One can almost feel a successful community; a community that is pleasant and prosperous. It seems to exude open friendship, rich culture, interesting history and meaningful spirit.

The community designer's assignment is to listen and observe; then to apply the lessons learned from successful and unsuccessful cities, towns and redevelopment areas. The prize is a physical space that serves people's desire to be sociable and civil. The lessons are:

- 1. Social capital is a valuable asset worth protecting; once lost, it is hard to regain.** Many cities and towns are unpleasant, poor, hostile and hazardous. The reasons are many and profound, but, at the end of the day, successful towns have honest and competent leadership, a holistic, long-term idea about the future and a feeling that community needs must matter as much as individual needs. Protect and nurture this community spirit.
- 2. The City's Physical Development Aspirations of the General Plan for buildings and spaces is most useful when it connects with the City's Social and Economic Aspirations.** This connection enables new and existing cities to holistically enhance and sustain their community's livability.
- 3. Social Capital, Community Spirit and Hometown Pride benefit from properly designed buildings and spaces.** The built environment matters. Buildings, plazas, streets, parks and other civic spaces host the social infrastructure that enables people to be social, civil and connected. Urban design can strengthen the city's social and economic prosperity.
- 4. Community Leaders are the City's Social Capital Entrepreneurs.** The community's leaders and risk takers, private and public, form the foundation upon which the city's social capital stands. Social capital is not self-creating or self-regenerating. The city's Social Infrastructure Aspiration of the General Plan should recognize, support and fully leverage leadership workshops and forums, high school programs, service club activities and the contributions the city's many not-for-profit organizations.
- 5. Fun and Beauty are Fundamental.** Successful cities have a joy about them. They have the "soft" civic amenities that enable fun, frivolity, celebrations, community enhancements and personal growth. Most "serious" towns have a light-hearted atmosphere with commitments to public art, parks, parades, concerts, trees, flowers and festivals that reflect the city's values and this attitude of enjoyment.

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READINGS

The literature abounds with articles on social capital; some related to new towns. The work in Australia and Canada seems to dominate the field. This article has drawn upon the many good ideas in the works referenced below.

Books

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Articles

1. ***"Balancing Community and Governance: Reforming the Community Association"***, presented to CNU 2000, Hyatt, Wayne S., Portland...copyright Hyatt & Stubblefield, P.C.
2. ***"Building Social Capital in Planned Communities: The Case of Springfield Lakes"***, Woolcock, Geoffrey, The University of Queensland, undated.
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4. ***"Social Capital and New Urbanism: Leading a Civic Horse to Water?"***, Sander, Thomas H., National Civic Review, Autumn (Fall) 2002.



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