

The Qualities of “Character” Main Streets in Central Florida.

The Survey of Established Towns.

Ten towns in Central Florida have many features that contribute to their designation as a *Character Town*. The survey presented on the following pages identifies specific features of each town and reveals many common features.

Date of Incorporation.

Six of the ten towns were incorporated in the ten year period from 1877 to 1887. Three others followed in the first decades of the 20th century. All but one is a “centennial town”.

Railroads made these towns possible. Henry Plant’s roads were built during the 1880’s connecting Jacksonville with Tampa and all points in between. While automobiles were not ever-present when these towns were established, their layout has a “universal” quality that accommodated this new transportation technology with ease and little disruption to the basic features of the towns.

Populations.

Four of the towns have current populations between 13,000 and 19,000 people. Six towns have 28,000, 29,000, 30,000, 38,000, 55,000 and 56,000 residents. Each has a surrounding suburban area and each is located within the corona of the Orlando Metropolitan area.

The prosperity of their main streets depends on city and surrounding populations. Five of the six larger towns have the most vibrant main streets of the bunch; so city population size matters from a downtown retail business perspective.

Main Street Dimensions.

Six of the main streets are 1,750 to 2,600 feet in length; five of these have 4-6 blocks of active retail shopping. This length is a reasonable walking distance by most retail design standards.

Three main streets are shorter, 650 to 1200 LF; each having 2 blocks of active retail shops. The one longer main street is 3,300 feet long with 6 active blocks.

Predominant Building Heights.

Each of the ten towns has a predominant building height along main street of 1-3 stories. There are a few 4 story buildings and five taller buildings – one 7 story building, one with 6 stories and three with 5 stories.

The occasional 4 to 7 story building does not destroy the scale of a character downtown when it is located near the “100% corner”, but the dominant height along main street works best at 2-3 stories.

Civic Buildings and Activities in Established Towns.

- ❑ **City Hall:** Each town has city hall on or near main street. Seven of the ten towns have new city halls that we consciously located downtown.
- ❑ **Libraries:** Six of the ten towns located their library downtown. Two are near-misses and two missed the city-building opportunity by choosing suburban sites.
- ❑ **Parks and Waterfronts:** Every town has an important public space downtown. Seven of the ten have active lakefronts.

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- ❑ **Theaters:** Many towns have old one-screen theaters that have been preserved and re-purposed for live performances. Five of the ten towns have this wonderful activity downtown.
- ❑ **Museums:** Six of the towns have local history or other museum downtown; an important feature of a character town. Museums invite visitors but also offer the opportunity to teach residents the history and culture of the town.
- ❑ **Hotels:** A downtown hotel helps day-trippers become week-enders bringing tourist dollars downtown. Seven of the ten towns have downtown hotels.
- ❑ **Post Offices:** Eight of ten character towns in Central Florida have post offices on or near their main streets. Even though the role of post offices is changing, they are still great places to meet neighbors and conduct business.
- ❑ **Beautiful and people-friendly streets.** Each of the ten character towns has created a street environment intended for people with wide sidewalks, trees, furniture, parking and cross-walks.

Conclusions about Established Towns.

The analysis of the ten character towns in Central Florida provides some parameters for the design of a successful small city or town.

1. **Age is an asset.** Usually older is not better, but in the case of existing character towns, the ones built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries seem to have the street network and building stock, if preserved, that suits today’s civic and business needs. Obviously, new towns cannot benefit from a one hundred year heritage, but the design concepts can be used in new town design.
2. **Population size seems to matter.** Towns with 30,000 to 50,000 residents had more active downtowns than smaller towns.
3. **The length of the “active zone” along main street has limits.** Six of the main streets are 1,750 to 2,600 feet in length; five of these have 4-6 blocks of shops and restaurants.
 - Establishing limits to the retail/restaurant core seems important. Main streets that are too long seem to dissipate the economic energy needed to support main street shops, restaurants and service businesses.
 - Activities on side-streets are also a factor, but most towns have a difficult time “turning” main street business around a corner.
4. **Main street buildings want to be 2-3 stories tall.** The *ten town survey* shows that one to three story buildings dominate main street. One story buildings are actually too short to create the feeling of a “space”; and four story buildings start to be too tall. Two to three stories is the sweet spot.
5. **Civic buildings and activities are great main street actors.** The trick is to create an active main street where people conduct the social and economic life of the town.
 - Civic buildings that serve the public offer a great opportunity to bring people downtown; opportunities squandered by locating civic buildings on the “highway” or in the suburbs are hard to recover from.
 - Post offices, local history and cultural museums, libraries and parks are critical investments in building main street. If the city does not invest on main street it is hard to expect others to do so.

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- 6. Respect for historic and natural resources pays multiple dividends.** First, it is “the right thing to do”. Additionally, history attracts visitors, educates residents and builds civic pride. Unique natural resources also attract visitors; both resident and non-resident. Historic and natural resources add authenticity to the town and garner respect from all. New and refurbished hotels, offices and commercial buildings convert non-productive assets to tax and fee generating resources. The nine “centennial towns” have each made significant public investments to preserve historic assets.
- 7. The holistic main street.** The complete picture has a beautiful street with trees, street furniture and wide sidewalks, embraced with two to three story civic buildings, shops, restaurants and offices confined to a four to six block core main street district focused on a park or waterfront.

The preservation and enhancement of existing character towns, the resurrection of existing towns without character and the design of new towns can benefit from considering the design features of these ten existing Central Florida character towns.

The Survey of “New Town” Main Streets.

Three notable “new towns” in Central Florida have taken the lessons of the established, “centennial towns”.

- ❑ **Avalon Park** had around 30,000 residents in 2013 with a 2 block main street totaling about 2,000 lineal feet. Buildings are 4 stories with mixed uses.

- ❑ **Baldwin Park** had about 10,000 residents in 2013. The main street is 1,500 feet in length consisting of 4 blocks with a mix of uses housed in 3 story buildings.
- ❑ **Celebration** had 8,000 residents in 2013. Main street is 2 blocks long; about 1,400 feet in length. Buildings are 2-3 stories except the theater and hotel housed in 4 story buildings.
- ❑ **Conclusions about “new towns”:**
 - **A mixed of uses** with restaurants, shops, hotels, offices and housing.
 - **Focused economic zones.** The main streets are 2-4 blocks long ranging from 1,400 to 2,000 feet in length.
 - **On-street parking.** Each has on-street parking on main street with supplemental public lots.
 - **A significant water body.** Each main street was proximate to a lake with a public promenade.
 - **Two to three story buildings.** Building heights were mostly 2-3 stories with 4 stories in Avalon Park across from the central lake.
 - **Few public buildings.** Opportunities are limited for city buildings in new towns; libraries, post offices and similar uses should be added whenever possible.
 - **The “new towns” are not directly connected to regional transportation systems.** Avalon Park and Baldwin Park are not on transit lines and not convenient to the expressway/ interstate system. Celebration has direct access to an expressway, not transit.

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ATTACHMENT A EXISTING CHARACTER TOWNS WITH SUCCESSFUL MAIN STREETS

Towns in Central Florida that have a certain charm, or character, have been surveyed to study the physical aspects of their “main street”. Interestingly, each was designed and established during the four decades from 1877 to 1916. During this “Age of American Empire” from the end of Reconstruction to the Great War towns were established with features and character that has transcended the technological and social changes of a hundred years.

CLERMONT, Incorporated 1916.

Population [2013]: 30,000

Main Street: W. Montrose Street

- West Ave to 5th
- Blocks/Length: 4/2,300’
- Predominant Bldg Height: 1-2 stories
- Special Features:
 - Lakefront park and City Hall, 3 stories

DeLAND, Incorporated 1882.

Population [2013]: 28,000

Main Street: Woodland Bv.

- Michigan to Voorhis
- Blocks/Length: 9/3,300’
- Predominant Bldg Height: 2-3 stories
- Special Features:
 - 1 bldg, 5 stories [NY and Woodland]
 - Theater, hotel and college [Stetson]
 - Future SunRail station, out of town
 - County seat

EUSTIS, Incorporated 1883.

Population [2013]: 19,214

Main Street: E. Magnolia Ave.

- Bay to Grove
- Blocks/Length: 2/650’
- Predominant Bldg Height: 2 stories
- Special Features:
 - Lakefront park
 - Theater, local history museum

KISSIMMEE, Incorporated 1883.

Population [2013]: 55,000

Main Street: Broadway

- Blocks/Length: 5/1,750’
- Predominant Bldg Height: 2-3 stories
- Special Features:
 - Lakefront park
 - City Center: 7 stories [a block to the east]
 - City Hall: 4 stories [a block to the west of main street]
 - County Administration: 4 stories [to the south on Emmett]
 - SunRail, Amtrak and Lynx Superstop Multi-modal station area
 - County seat

LAKE MARY, Incorporated 1973.

Population [2013]: 14,807

Main Street: W. Lakeview Ave. and N. 4th Street

- Blocks/Length: 2/1,200’
- Predominant Bldg Height: 1-2 stories
- Special Features:
 - City Hall park
 - SunRail station

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MOUNT DORA, Incorporated 1910.

Population [2013]: 13,000

Main Street: Donnelly Street

- Blocks/Length: 2/350’
- Predominant Building Height: 2 stories
- Special Features:
 - Lakefront parks and Donnelly Park
 - Lakeside Inn

SANFORD, Incorporated 1877.

Population [2013]: 56,000

Main Street: 1st Street [Sanford and Elm]

- Blocks/Length: 6/2,000’
- Predominant Building Height: 2 stories
- Special Features:
 - Lakefront park and promenade
 - 3 Buildings, 4 and 5 stories [1st and Park]; 6 story lakefront condo
 - Theater and hotel
 - County seat

TAVARES, Incorporated 1885.

Population [2013]: 15,000

Main Street: W. Main Street

- Roundabout to Roundabout
- Blocks/Length: 6/2,100’
- Predominant Bldg Height: 1-2 stories
- Special Features:
 - Lakefront park, Sea Plane terminal
 - County Admin. Bldg., 5 stories
 - Courthouse, 4 stories [west end of retail zone]
 - Lakefront Hotel, 4-5 stories
 - County seat

WINTER GARDEN, Incorporated 1903.

Population [2013]: 38,000

Main Street: Plant Street [Woodland to Henry]

- Blocks/Length: 5/1,800’
- Predominant Building Height: 1-2 stories
- Special Features:
 - 4 Buildings, 3 stories [Edgewater Hotel, Church, Garden Bldg, City Hall]
 - Theater
 - Regional bike trail, West Orange Trail

WINTER PARK, Incorporated 1887.

Population [2013]: 29,000

Main Street: Park Avenue [Fairbanks to Canton]

- Blocks/Length: 8/2,600’
- Predominant Building Height: 1-3 stories
- Special Features:
 - Central Park, approximately 5 acres
 - Barnett Bank [fka] 5 stories
 - Theaters, museums and galleries
 - Hotels
 - Rollins College