

The Character Town Workshop

The “Character Towns” of Central Florida...#1 of the Analytical Series

The Idea of a Character Town.

A “character town” is a small city or town with unique and authentic qualities that foster home town pride. Character Towns are friendly and inviting places with great neighborhoods, vibrant main street business communities and respected historic and natural resources. Character Towns support a sociable and civil society; a society that is proud of its home town, protective of its heritage and committed to its well-being. A character town is an interesting, pleasant and prosperous place for residents, businesses and visitors.

A planning foundation for the idea of a character town has been established through essays in this magazine. Ideas and checklists have been offered that describe the philosophy and the specifics of a town with that special quality that engenders pride.

Central Florida of Character Towns.

The living examples that prove the concept are found in Central Florida. Central Florida consists of seven counties anchored by the City of Orlando. The region is fortunate to have many small cities and towns with great neighborhoods and vibrant downtowns in the “main street” tradition.

In the Spring of 2015, the planning and economic development professionals from ten of these towns met to discuss issues of common concern and share experiences about how to entice private infill and redevelopment investments into their towns, especially their downtowns.

The Character Town Workshop.

Starting with the initial gathering in May 2015, the ten town group has grown to seventeen. The group meets in a workshop setting every quarter in a different town. The workshops to date have convened in Winter Garden, Kissimmee, DeLand, Tavares and Sanford...each a character town in their own right.

The sessions are informal with two main features: a Roundtable discussion with each town planner presenting their current activities, dilemmas and questions; and a presentation of current activities by the host community.

The Roundtable usually takes a couple of hours for the attendees to each summarize the plans, the codes, the development activities and the community events happening in their town.

The second feature is a presentation by the host community of the activities in their community. The Workshop has been fortunate to have included discussions by the city manager and the Mayor about their aspirations and strategies for the town.

Each of the host towns has the good fortune of having a significant redevelopment or infill project in the development stage. The main event is a presentation by the project developer and designer. Each is the first such project in the town; each developer is a “pioneer”. The discussion covers lessons learned and the factors that drew the developer to the project along with questions and answers about funding, market and the hazards of pioneering.

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The Series.

CharacterTowns.org has published general and specific articles on character towns and some of the features of the ten towns in Central Florida. The wandering exploration is being structured into a series of articles focused on the ten towns. *The Series* will present specific information about the selected towns on the main features of each character town. Their:

- Great neighborhoods,
- Vibrant downtowns,
- Historic and natural resources,
- Social infrastructure
- Economic development programs and
- Funding and financing programs for infill and redevelopment.

Dates of Incorporation	
Character Towns of Central Florida	
Clermont	1916
DeLand	1882
Eustis	1883
Kissimmee	1883
Lake Mary	1973
Mount Dora	1910
Sanford	1887
Tavares	1885
Winter Garden	1903
Winter Park	1887

Source: wckplanning from Wikipedia

Common Beginnings.

Interestingly, railroads made these towns possible. Henry Plant’s roads were built during the 1880’s connecting Jacksonville with Tampa and all points in between. Existing towns were connected and new towns were created.

The good fortune that followed the railroads was economic, but one of the long term payoffs was the universal quality of the design of each town. The grid was the basis as was a “traditional” main street that served as the civic, cultural and commercial focal point of the town. This universal design has been recognized by the Congress for the New Urbanism and it has served the towns well as they grew from horse and buggy rural towns to small urban cities with cars, electricity, suburbs and globalization.

This period is known by several names:

- The Age of American Empire sponsored by Presidents McKinley and Roosevelt when the United States began to be an important international power,
- The Progressive Era [1890 –1920] when the abuses of the robber barons were being curtailed by social service advocates and the trust busters.
- The City Beautiful Era that benefited from Burnham, Olmstead, Saint-Gaudens, the young John Nolen and many other devotees of The City Beautiful movement. It was a part of the Progressive Era with the World Columbian Exposition [1893], the McMillan Plan for Washington D.C. [1902] and the Plan for Chicago [1909]. This movement influences the design of many towns, including those in Central Florida.

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Common Features.

Almost every small city and town in America has some of the attributes listed below. Towns considered character towns have crossed the tipping point with a number of the more

significant ones. Few towns have the complete package with the list serving as a qualitative quantification for future improvements and enhancements.

Character Town Attributes

Great Neighborhoods that include:

1. **A Diversity of Housing** locations, types, prices and styles.
2. **Ubiquitous Pedestrian-oriented Connections** with walkable streets, sidewalks and trails.
3. **Accessible Daily Need Venues** include neighborhood shops, schools, parks and civic buildings.
4. **Organizations** with identifiable service boundaries and neighbor participation.

Vibrant Downtowns with:

1. **Buildings, public and private**, of two to four stories with active and accessible ground floor uses.
2. **Streets** that are beautiful, walkable and commercially successful.
3. **Active storefront uses** with a variety of shops, restaurants, civic and cultural uses.
4. **Personal and Business Services** .
5. **Hotels** and other types of visitor accommodations to support “small town” tourism.
6. **Venues for community entertainment, education, culture and personal gatherings** including theaters for live performances, local history museums, schools, post offices, libraries, gathering places for religious and wedding gatherings.
7. **Civic spaces and buildings for programmed activities** such as book fairs, parades, festivals, car shows, sporting events and community celebrations.
8. **Visitor information and concierge service centers**, physical and virtual.

Historic and Natural Resources: Amenities that engender hometown pride and respect through the preservation, display, use and celebration of historic and natural resources.

Authentic and Unique Uses and Activities, such as:

1. The West Orange Trail in Winter Garden, Ocoee and Apopka; Central Park in Winter Park;
2. Powell’s Book Store in Portland or Haslam’s in St. Petersburg; S. F. Travis Hardware in Cocoa Village or The Little Drug Company on Canal Street in New Smyrna Beach;
3. The Lakeside Inn in Mount Dora or The Gold Mine Museum in Dahlonega; the lakefront parks and promenades in Clermont, Eustis, Kissimmee, Sanford and Tavares;
4. The downtown colleges, theaters, art galleries, art festivals and local history museums in DeLand, Eustis, Winter Garden, and Winter Park;
5. Carriage rides touring Fernandina Beach’s historic neighborhoods; and
6. Country music on 6th Street in Austin; Spoleto in Charleston; or The Miami Book Fair.

In sum, the “character town” is an interesting, pleasant and prosperous place for residents, businesses and visitors with a unique quality and beauty that is inviting, friendly, proud and respectful of heritage.

Source: wck | planning.com