

Character Town Neighborhoods.

The “Character Towns” of Central Florida...#6 of the Analytical Series

INTRODUCTION

The two core assets of every character town are its neighborhoods and its downtown. As the city pursues its **vision** of being an interesting, pleasant and prosperous place, neighborhood creation, enhancement and preservation take center stage as a primary **strategy** of the city.

The first step is to embrace **the primacy of neighborhoods**, to fully commit to the idea that neighborhoods, residences, and places where people live are of primary importance to the city.

Neighborhoods and homes must be valued and protected from crime, falling property values, structural deterioration and other obnoxious intrusions. A “**Great Neighborhoods**” program is a partnership between neighborhoods and the city to value and protect the quality of residential life for all residents.

The strategic objectives critical to fulfilling the city’s strategy to preserving and enhancing its neighborhoods are:

- To commit the city to the importance of preserving and enhancing neighborhoods.
- To organize the residents and stakeholders.
- To plan neighborhoods to serve the social, physical and economic needs of residents and the city.
- To protect and enhance existing and new neighborhoods.
- To enable new investments through home improvements and infill housing.
- To connect neighborhoods *physically, economically and socially*.
- To educate and train neighborhood leaders.



Single-family neighborhoods are traditional.



Mixed-use neighborhoods with apartments, offices and shops are emerging.

WHAT MAKES A GREAT NEIGHBORHOOD

1. A variety of functional attributes that contribute to a resident’s day-to-day living [residential, commercial or mixed use].
2. Accommodations with multimodal transportation [bike/peds, drivers] systems.
3. Design and architectural features that are visually interesting.
4. Encouragements for human contact and social activities.
5. Promotions for community involvement and maintenance of a secure environment.
6. Promotion of sustainability principles that are responsive to climatic demands.
7. Memorable character.

Source: Planning Magazine, January 2008, p8.

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THE PRIMACY OF NEIGHBORHOODS

The first responsibility of every city is to protect the homes and neighborhoods of its citizens. Neighborhood preservation, enhancement and protection are critical activities for a city to be a prosperous and pleasant place to live.

Primacy of neighborhoods is important because:

- **First**, neighborhoods are where most people live and raise their families, invest their savings and spend their time. A basic function of the city is to protect the homes and neighborhoods of its citizens.
- The **second** reason is economic. Residences should be appreciating assets. Historically, home investment has been the primary means for creating family wealth.
- **Thirdly**, prosperity of the entire community depends on having sound neighborhoods. People decide to stay in town because of the quality of life in the neighborhoods. New employers and employees decide to move to a community for the same reasons.

- The **fourth** reason is about community rejuvenation. Redevelopment and infill is a constant process in any living organism such as a city. Neighborhoods that feel vulnerable to intrusions caused by infill and redevelopment must fight it in nearby corridors or centers. Fear of change diminishes a city’s ability to continue to re-invent itself with new investment.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES AND PRINCIPLES FOR A NEIGHBORHOOD PLAN.

Commit

Neighborhoods host the majority of the city’s residents. The immediate and long-term health of every neighborhood and every home in every neighborhood sets the tone for the entire city; remembering that the weakest neighborhoods reflect city values. The stability, safety and preservation of property values are the joint responsibility of the homeowners and the city; both must be committed to the success of all neighborhoods.

Organize

The city can establish a neighborhood planning grant program to fund organizational and planning activities in neighborhoods that have an interest in protecting and enhancing their community. A “Qualify” Neighborhood Program can solicit neighborhoods to organize themselves and seek certification as a “Qualified” Association to solicit applications for city grant support to complete neighborhood plans using a city-created *Guide for Neighborhood Planning*.



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Plan

Budget funds and city staff each year to support neighborhood planning for “qualified” associations. Review, amend as necessary and approve the Neighborhood Plan, including codes, once it has been completed according to city standards. Consider the “Neighborhood Design Principles” on the following page.

Invest

Continue to provide processes and incentives to enable and encourage replacement and the proper expansion of existing homes through home improvements and expansions. Likewise, continue to encourage the infill of new homes and apartments with redevelopment activities that protect the integrity of the established neighborhoods. Plan public improvement investments.

Protect and Enhance

Continue to refine the city’s comprehensive plan and land development regulations to protect neighborhoods from obnoxious intrusions and adjacent activities, public service deficiencies and code violations.

Connect

Continue to provide sidewalks, crosswalks, street lights, trails and other pedestrian and bicycle connections between neighborhoods, schools, parks and nearby shopping areas.

Educate and Communicate

The city is in a great position to educate neighborhood leaders and organizers knowing that a better informed and educated citizenry is a community asset.



Older neighborhoods are invaluable.



Housing of all types accommodate price variety.

PRINCIPLES OF NEIGHBORHOOD DESIGN

- They are walkable from end to end,
- They have a civic core and a mix of uses and amenities,
- They have an interconnected street network,
- They have recognizable boundaries,
- They provide for chance meetings and privacy, and
- They have a variety of housing types.

Source: Urban Land Magazine, May 2004, p63.

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Neighborhood Design Principles

The Inner City Task Force of the Congress for the New Urbanism has developed a set of design principles that have proven effective in inner city neighborhoods. These principles have been tested in several HOPE VI projects. They are proposed as a set of working principles to be further tested and refined through use.

- **Citizen and Community Involvement:** Engage residents, neighbors, civic leaders, politicians, bureaucrats, developers, and local institutions throughout the process of designing change for neighborhoods.
- **Economic Opportunity:** The design of neighborhood development should accommodate management techniques and scales of construction that can be contracted to local and minority businesses.
- **Diversity:** Provide a broad range of housing types and price levels to bring people of diverse ages, races, and incomes into daily interaction – strengthening the personal and civic bonds essential to an authentic community.
- **Neighborhoods:** Neighborhoods are compact, pedestrian–friendly, and mixed use with many activities of daily life available within walking distance. New development should help repair existing neighborhoods or create new ones and should not take the form of an isolated “project.”
- **Infill Development:** Reclaim and repair blighted and abandoned areas within existing neighborhoods by using infill development strategically to conserve economic investment and social fabric.
- **Mixed Use:** Promote the creation of mixed use neighborhoods that support the functions of daily life: employment, recreation, shopping, dining, learning and civic engagement.
- **City-wide and Regional Connections:** Neighborhoods should be connected to regional patterns of transportation and land use, to open space, and to natural systems. The primary task of all urban architecture and landscape design is the physical definition of streets and public spaces as places of shared use. Neighborhoods should have an interconnected network of streets and public open space.
- **Public Open Space:** The interconnected network of streets and public open space should provide opportunities for recreation and appropriate settings for civic buildings.
- **Safety and Civic Engagement:** The relationship of buildings and streets should enable neighbors to create a safe and stable neighborhood by providing “eyes on the street” and should encourage interaction and community identity. Provide a clear definition of public and private realm through block and street design responding to local traditions.
- **Dwelling as Mirror of Self:** Recognize the dwelling as the basic element of a neighborhood and as the key to self-esteem and community pride. This includes the clear definition of outdoor space for each dwelling.
- **Accessibility:** Buildings should be designed to be accessible and visitable while respecting traditional urban fabric.
- **Local Architectural Character and Design Codes:** The image and character of new development should respond to the best traditions of residential and mixed use architecture in the area. The economic health and harmonious evolution of neighborhoods can be improved through graphic urban design codes that serve as predictable guides for change.

Source: *Principles for Inner City Neighborhood Design; A Collaboration of the Congress for the New Urbanism and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1999.*

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CRITICAL ELEMENTS FOR GREAT NEIGHBORHOODS

The critical elements of a great neighborhood, regardless of its economic and social status, remain the same. Successful neighborhoods do not just happen.

Community-wide leaders know the critical elements and dynamics of successful neighborhoods including the processes and standards that will produce the desired results. Neighborhood leaders have a similar sense from a more localized perspective. In both cases, there are critical elements in every neighborhood, such as:

1. A Viable and Diverse Housing Stock.

Neighborhoods need various types, styles and prices of housing. Subdivisions with identical houses are not usually great models for neighborhoods. The housing mix includes:

- Preservation of existing homes,
- Investment in existing homes through maintenance and expansion, and
- New infill housing of all types, densities and values consistent with the integrity of the established neighborhood.

2. Public Safety.

There needs to be a sense of security with neighbors watching out for each other and enjoying a sense of security within their homes and neighborhoods.

3. Trees and Beauty, Community Necessities.

Street trees, neighborhood tree canopies, trees in parks and parking lots create an entirely different impression than barren paved or open spaces; and they reduce heat-island effects.



Neighborhoods with quiet residential streets.



Street presence is important.

4. Accessways.

Streets, buses, trains and bike/pedways that enable safe and convenient mobility in the neighborhood and in the city, including:

- **Neighborhood Streets** that are typically two lanes wide fronted with homes, space for casual on-street parking, sidewalks on both sides of the street, curbs and gutters, street lights, and canopy street trees. Neighborhood streets should be quiet, walkable, playable and visually enjoyable.

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- **Residential Connector Streets** that are two or four-lane streets that carry more traffic than a neighborhood street; but still are fronted by residential houses. The four-lane street is not the rationale for converting residential uses to non-residential activities. They have sidewalks on both sides of the street with street lights, canopy street trees, curbs and gutters with occasional on-street parking, traffic lights and traffic calming.
- **Transit, Pedestrian and Bicycle Connections** with a network of routes, walkways and bikeways that provide safe alternatives to auto travel.
- **Pedestrian and bike safety programs** with sidewalks and street lights.



Transit services of all kinds.

5. Places Nearby and Safely Accessible that serve Daily Needs, including:

- **Ample and Accessible Parks and Open Spaces.** Parks, open spaces and walkable streets need to be available to residents for casual recreation, for neighborhood gatherings and for walking access to parks.



Neighborhood parks and schools are great gathering places.

- **Neighborhood Oriented Elementary Schools.** Whether in the neighborhood or not, there needs to be a physical and social connection between the neighborhood and its elementary school. Attendance zones that do not split neighborhoods should be a major objective of the neighborhood plan.
- **Gathering Places** – The casual, unplanned encounter is an important part of life. The objective is to have post offices, city offices, shops, restaurants, libraries, parks and schools convenient to every neighborhood.



Farmers' markets are regular meeting places that build community.

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- **Nearby Civic and Spiritual Institutions.** Non-obnoxious activities that provide open space, interesting architecture and variety such as small scale libraries, places of worship and small shops with limited hours and parking are useful. The uses do not matter as much as the form and scale of the buildings.
 - **Nearby Neighborhood Serving Shops, Restaurants and Businesses.** This proximity offers safe and convenient access to local jobs, as well as products and services for daily life.
6. **Pride of Place and Property.** This attribute is reflected by residents and property owners investing time and money to maintain and enhance their homes, neighborhoods and business. A strong relationship between the city and the neighborhood organizations fosters civic pride.
 7. **Public Services.** Adequate public services help instill pride, and they encourage new investment since residents know their property will benefit from a high standard of maintenance for surrounding homes. Public services that protect property values including: frequent trash and garbage pick-up with periodic “bulk goods” disposal; code enforcement; adequate water and sewer facilities and flood protection.



Walk-to grocery stores are fine neighborhood amenities.



Neighborhood libraries are a luxury, no matter how humble.



Downtown bill-paying supports neighborhoods.



Beauty permeates great neighborhoods.

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THE NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING PROCESS

Neighborhoods are more than houses and subdivisions. Neighborhoods are mixed-use, organic places that grow and change. They are the places where families live and participate in society. They have homes, schools, parks, shopping and other activities integral to daily life. Building neighborhoods involves creating and strengthening all these places as a system.

Vision to Strategy to Action

The vision of the city as a pleasant and prosperous place depends on the successful strategy to create and maintain strong neighborhoods. The vision of the residents for their neighborhood drives the process.

The strategy for creating strong, successful and sustainable neighborhoods is based on the fundamental idea that neighborhoods exist as distinct physical, economic and social organizations. As with any organization, they benefit from planning, design, investment, management and maintenance.

The resulting Neighborhood Plan consists of numerous action plans to be executed by various city departments to protect and enhance neighborhood streets, parks, schools and shopping districts. Public facilities and services are critical to this effort.

CONCLUSION

Strong neighborhoods that know they will be protected by the city are more amenable to supporting new development, redevelopment and infill that enable the city to continually rejuvenate itself.

The Neighborhood Planning Process A Checklist

1. Establish or strengthen the neighborhood organization with a system that provides a guide to neighborhood planning and then “qualifies” neighborhood organizations to receive benefits from the city.
2. Delineate neighborhood boundaries that are defensible by the organization.
3. Prepare a land use and circulation plan for each neighborhood incorporating plans for streets, parks, schools, shops and the pathways that connect them.
4. Embrace a diversity of housing types, styles and price points reflecting the changing composition of the American household.
5. Plan for the full range of infrastructure from public safety to health care to stormwater management.
6. Establish a financial plan for funding and sustaining the neighborhood organization and its infrastructure systems.
7. Provide a beautification plan with canopy and decorative trees on all streets, in parks and schools.
8. Establish communication systems within the neighborhood, the neighborhood organization and the host city government that are interactive and transparent using tradition and digital media.
9. Fully engage the city government in the neighborhood planning, design, implementation and evaluation process.

Source: wck planning, inc.

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ATTACHMENT A

Neighborhood Programs in Existing Character Towns

Background.

Ten towns in Central Florida that have a certain charm, or “character”, have been surveyed to study the physical aspects of their neighborhoods and their neighborhood planning systems. Interestingly, the historic neighborhoods were first designed and built during the four decades from 1877 to 1916. During this “Age of American Empire”, traditional neighborhoods were “laid out” in a typical grid pattern as was the style as the 19th century turned to the 20th; and each was typically developed with houses built over an extended time period creating an eclectic collection of housing types and styles.

In each of the ten selected towns, from personal observation, there are fine neighborhoods along with not-so-fine residential areas; typical of most towns. The question is – how did the fine neighborhoods get to be fine and what can be done to enable the not-so-fine neighborhoods to be improved? The question for the ages in city planning circles.

Observations of General Conditions.

The limited survey was designed to determine how each town described its neighborhood planning, protection and enhancement efforts. The official web site of each town was queried in multiple ways, looking for evidence of focus on neighborhood issues. In general, each had the same approach:

- Each town has a comprehensive plan with a housing element that contains policies about protecting neighborhoods.
- Many towns provided information about available neighborhood watch programs.
- Each town listed services provided to residents ranging from complaint departments to library and parks boards to information about festivals and other events.
- Most towns offered information about how city government worked and how residents could participate and find information about city actions.
- Only one, Winter Park, had a “button” on their web site labeled “neighborhoods”.
- Not one of the towns offered a map of their neighborhoods; neither their general location nor their specific boundaries. A check with the City of Orlando, once having a Great Neighborhoods Program, revealed that they still have a map identifying all neighborhoods and boundaries. Perhaps some of the ten towns may have such a map, but it was not readily available on their web site.

Observations of Specific Activities.

Specific information labeled for neighborhoods or homeowners included a paucity of offerings:

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- DeLand includes neighborhood protection as the first of five elements in its strategic plan.
- Sanford offers a Citizens Academy to educate residents how to best use and access city government.
- Tavares offers a Neighborhood Guide to Stormwater Systems and a map of downtown neighborhoods in its Composite Plan.
- Winter Garden has a Customer Service Center.
- Winter Park, as mentioned, has a section on its web page devoted to neighborhoods; and it offers Neighborhood Enhancement Grants.

Conclusions from the Survey of the Ten Towns listed below.

1. Each town has fine neighborhoods that seem to survive through the decades. The design and investment of previous generations may be the critical factor combined with the always present condition of wealthier families living in finer homes with the resources and the knowledge to protect themselves.
2. If protecting residents in their neighborhoods and their homes and enhancing their property values are primary functions of city and town government, weaker neighborhoods need: identification, planning, organization, education and infrastructure. This program should be established and more prominently present in the town’s presentation of itself. Perhaps this is a form over function fallacy, but presenting neighborhood programs up front and personal seems the proper approach.
3. Nothing is more important to a town than the strength, quality and function of its neighborhoods; not its downtown, parks, or schools. An active neighborhood planning program is an essential activity of every town to protect and enhance neighborhoods that are already strong and to elevate those that are not. A town is as strong as its weakest neighborhood.

CLERMONT, Incorporated 1916.
Population [2013]: 30,000

MOUNT DORA, Incorporated 1910.
Population [2013]: 13,000

DeLAND, Incorporated 1882.
Population [2013]: 28,000

SANFORD, Incorporated 1877.
Population [2013]: 56,000

EUSTIS, Incorporated 1883.
Population [2013]: 19,214

TAVARES, Incorporated 1885.
Population [2013]: 15,000

KISSIMMEE, Incorporated 1883.
Population [2013]: 55,000

WINTER GARDEN, Incorporated 1903.
Population [2013]: 38,000

LAKE MARY, Incorporated 1973.
Population [2013]: 14,807

WINTER PARK, Incorporated 1887.
Population [2013]: 29,000

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READINGS

Many of the readings listed below relate to solving seemingly intractable conflicts and managing complex resources; these ideas apply, with a little imagination, to neighborhoods, neighborhood planning and neighborhood organizations. Others on the list offer insights into raising expectations and establishing aspirations above the norm. Neighborhood planning deserves this approach. Each reading has a lesson applicable to planning Great Neighborhoods.

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6. Friedman, Thomas L.; ***Hot, Flat and Crowded, Why We Need a Green Revolution – And How It Can Renew America***, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.
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10. Saunders, Doug; ***Arrival City, How the Largest Migration in History Reshaped Our World***, Pantheon Books; New York; 2010.
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