Envisioning a Town with Character.

Character Towns don't just happen; they are made by visionary leaders who are about the town, its people and its future.

A Character Town is an Emotional Experience.

There is a hometown in our minds where we want to live, to visit or to have a business. It appeals to our senses; all of them, from sights and sounds to tastes and smells. It feels good, sensually and physically. It is a place where we want to live in a home that is safe, comfortable and affordable; a place where we know our neighbors; a place where we can walk; where we can easily go shopping, go out to eat and be entertained or educated.

It's also a place where we visit. We look for small cities and towns with character where we can enjoy an afternoon, a day, a weekend or longer. A newly discovered character town feels good.

A character town is also a great place to locate a business. Character towns and small cities are ideal places for high-tech businesses and their high-skill workers. With a reasonable investment in infrastructure, small towns are accessible to the world and the global economy. Small towns make sense for a small business with a big reach.

Great neighborhoods with "missing middle" housing.

Vibrant downtowns.

The Mission is to Build Communities with Character.

The mission of design professionals, developers and city officials who build the city is to understand how to discern and pursue the town's vision and how to develop a strategy that preserves and enhances community character where it exists, and how to create it where it is absent. Community-based vision drives the town's strategy which then directs every action of the town. In the end, the prize is a small city or town that evokes an emotional attachment between its people and the space they inhabit.

Civic pride is the fundamental factor that drives everything. Where community character exists, some mystical concoction of the town's economic, social and physical attributes has resulted in **community joy** and **hometown spirit**. The final critical element is **institutional trust**. These are the guiding forces behind the physical design of the town, the strength of its society, the respect for its historic, cultural and natural resources and the material well-being of its citizens. Civic pride, once understood, is the means for protecting and improving the entire community.

Economic Attributes of a Character Town.

Prosperity plays an important role in character towns. Prosperity does not necessarily mean extreme wealth; just good jobs with decent wages based on a strong work ethic and a business community dedicated to the success of the town. A certain level of prosperity is necessary to sustain a community. Social and physical infrastructure work together to support and expand the town's economic base. City incentives and financial support for infill and redevelopment projects help investors help the city. Private-public partnerships can be productive.

Economic Attributes of a Character Town

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS:
- ❏ A Strong Data Base that identifies business participation in regional and global commerce.
- ❏ Development Plans that build town character to attract New Innovation Economy "talent".
- ❏ Collaborative Business Retention and Recruiting Plans.
- ❏ Workforce Development Programs prepared in partnership with business sector.
- ❏ Marketing and Public Relations Plans with a local council of export-oriented businesses.
- ❏ Assignments for each city, institutional and business player.

COMPREHENSIVE LONG-RANGE FINANCE PROGRAMS:
- ❏ Annual and capital budgets.
- ❏ Special district plans and budgets.
- ❏ Capital improvements that support economic development.

INFILL AND REDEVELOPMENT FINANCING AND INCENTIVES:
- ❏ Instituting land development entitlements.
- ❏ Providing physical infrastructure improvements.
- ❏ Offering public finance tools, incentives and partnerships.
- ❏ Marketing and promotional assistance.

ENTREPRENEURIAL ATTITUDES AND INFRASTRUCTURE:
- ❏ Cross-leveraging social, economic and physical capital.
- ❏ Training and support programs for startup companies.
- ❏ Connecting to global networks with high-speed internet service.
- ❏ Tolerating responsible risk by public entrepreneurs.
- ❏ Establishing partnerships and collaborations.
- ❏ Providing business resource centers, incubators and accelerators.
- ❏ Branding of innovation and innovators.
- ❏ Celebrating successes.

Tight coordination of the town's economic development program and its capital improvements budget provides real benefit.

1. The economic development program is the purview of the private sector and is normally lead and funded by the town's business leaders.
2. Entrepreneurs and small businesses are an important part of the mix. Business success is critical to community success.
3. The city's finance plan functions as the town's business plan. The town's financial sustainability requires a comprehensive long view of its sources and uses of funds.

Social Attributes of a Character Town.

Character towns are where we aspire to live; they are the places we visit; they sustain our interest and curiosity; they provide for our safety and well-being. They offer a creative environment for business, education and leisure. Character towns are composed of people who are, for the most part, friendly, welcoming, open and dedicated to community goals that rival personal goals. To paraphrase Sir Winston Churchill, such cities, towns and places build our character, as we build theirs.

Social entrepreneurs are as important to character towns as economic and financial ones. They take action to create value through community programs, partnerships and facilities. Encouraging leaders from cities, institutions and private businesses to venture out, in a transparent way, as social entrepreneurs is a useful role for city and town governments. Community trust enables public officials, institutional leaders and public entrepreneurs to be responsibly aggressive with manageable risk to provide community-serving benefits.

Social Attributes of a Character Town

ENACTMENT OF PROGRAMS:
Foster mutual expectations by engaging all segments of the town's society.
Promote broad-based respect for rules of civic behavior.
Build trust through open and frequent communication.
Pursue a common interest in fun with community events and celebrations.

USE OF PARTNERSHIPS:
Celebrate shared rituals and traditions.
Enhance the city's capacity for self-reliance by building its capacity to solve problems.
Construct ubiquitous connections.
Appreciate enlightened civic and municipal leadership.

LEVERAGE PHYSICAL FACILITIES TO PRODUCE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC BENEFITS:
Understand that public spaces matter; they serve social and economic purposes.
Insist upon respect for civic assets.
Showcase the town's great neighborhoods, its vibrant downtown and its system of connected educational, cultural and recreational venues to retain and recruit businesses and their workers.

Physical Attributes of a Character Town.

Small cities and towns of character naturally integrate their physical assets into the social and economic fabric of the town. Few cities have all the physical attributes; but small cities and towns can find success, a step at a time, with a vision of becoming a character town attractive to residents, visitors and businesses. The guide of attributes below may help.

Physical Attributes of a Character Town

GREAT NEIGHBORHOODS include:
- ☐ <u>A diversity of housing:</u> A wide variety of housing locations, types, prices and styles.
- ☐ <u>Ubiquitous access and pedestrian connections:</u> An interconnected system of walkable streets, sidewalks and trails that connect the places people use as they go about their daily activities.
- ☐ <u>Accessible daily need uses:</u> Walk-to shops, schools, parks, theaters, offices and civic buildings.
- ☐ <u>Participatory organizations:</u> Neighborhood associations with identifiable boundaries that protect residents from obnoxious intrusions and facilitate partnering with local government.

VIBRANT DOWNTOWNS: The main thing is to keep "Main Street" the main street with:
- ☐ <u>Buildings of two to four stories</u> with active and accessible ground floor retail, restaurants and other uses alive beyond nine-to-five weekdays.
- ☐ <u>Streets that are inviting,</u> not foreboding, with two travel lanes, wide sidewalks, on-street and off-street parking with tight building face separations across the street, bus stops, crosswalks, street trees, street lights and business friendly signs; plus local ownership of the street.
- ☐ <u>Active storefront uses</u> such as restaurants, shops, farmers' markets with regional foods, convenience shopping for drugs, groceries, books, gifts, clothing, hardware and ice cream.
- ☐ <u>Personal and business services</u> such as laundries, dry cleaners, barber shops, car care shops, plus tech support and business services like banks, copy centers and business incubators.
- ☐ <u>Hotels</u> and other types of visitor accommodations to support "small town" tourism.
- ☐ <u>Venues for community entertainment and personal gatherings</u> including theaters for live performances, local history museums, religious gatherings and weddings.
- ☐ <u>Programmed activities</u> such as book fairs, parades, festivals and community celebrations.
- ☐ <u>Visitor information centers</u>, physical and virtual, for residents, business and visitors with guides to local places and activities, notice of non-recurring and ticketed events.

RESPECTED HISTORIC AND NATURAL RESOURCES: Hometown pride is engendered through the preservation, display, use and celebration of natural resources and historic places and buildings, parks, lakes and waterfronts.

CONNECTED COMMUNITY VENUES: A system of walkable streets, sidewalks and trails that connect close-in neighborhoods with schools, parks, shopping, libraries, museums, theaters, downtown businesses and civic buildings like city hall, the post office and the civic auditorium.

COMMUNITY PRIDE BUILT ON AUTHENTICITY using an iconic place or traditional event, unique to the town, with Florida examples such as:
- ☐ The West Orange Trail in Winter Garden, Ocoee and Apopka; Central Park in Winter Park.
- ☐ Haslam's Book Store in St. Petersburg; S. F. Travis Hardware in Cocoa Village; The Lakeside Inn in Mount Dora; or the lakefront parks in Clermont, Eustis, Kissimmee, Sanford and Tavares.
- ☐ The downtown colleges, theaters, art galleries, festivals and local history museums in DeLand, Eustis, Winter Garden, and Winter Park; Carriage rides in Fernandina Beach's historic neighborhoods.

The Visioning Process and Metrics.

Creating and articulating a vision for the small city or town requires a thoughtful analysis of the current state of the community and its aspirations. Professional help is advised. In general, the discussions are open to all; they are interactive and iterative with short periods between sessions. At the end of the day, progress towards achieving the vision must be made and be seen to be made.

Performance management programs assure constituents that the vision-driven strategies are properly directing the action plans. The metric system assures not only that things are being done right, but that the right things are being done. Metric systems are most effective when they are up-front, transparent, learning-oriented and understandable to stakeholders, community leaders and city officials.

Envisioning a Character Town: The Process

1. **Evaluate, or scan, the current situation.** Document the existing situation through a community scan, SWOT analysis or similar technique that evaluates the town's condition, its assets and liabilities. Also, determine the motivation for the visioning effort. Who wants to establish a new or revised vision of the community? What is the dissatisfaction with the status quo?
2. **Convene the stakeholders.** This group can be the entire town, the town leaders, the neighborhoods or the business community. It is best if every aspect of the town is involved from the start.
3. **Discuss the scan and define problems.** Examine, in a public forum, the results of the community scan. Discuss the town's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Keep the discussions going until there is a general consensus of the town's condition and its problems.
4. **Look at models and examples.** What other communities do people like? Why? What features are important? What are the unfavorable features of the model towns?
5. **Workshop all issues and opportunities.** Once the current situation is agreed upon, problems identified and models examined, begin to collectively talk about what would be a great future for the town. Work through inconsistencies like high service levels and low taxes. Leave nothing unsaid. This process may take several sessions with open agendas or sessions focused on specific issues.
6. **Develop alternative visions.** In many communities, there are factions with different views of the future. These can be documented and then discussed. The process is not over until the disparate visions are rectified without resignation. This is not a win-lose game; the purpose is to find common ground that everyone can rally around.
7. **Construct a consensus vision.** If one emerges, congratulations. If the differing views persist, an initial consensus may not be possible. Since the city's go-forward strategy and all of its action plans depend on being vision-driven, a vision must be established. In the worst case, the factions continue to feud and the town's future is held in limbo. In the best case, the factions recognize their differing views and resolve to keep working the conflict until it is resolved. Striving for consensus is a worthy goal even if it takes years to achieve; which sometimes it does.
8. **Build partnerships and coalitions** with like-minded people and organizations.

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A Hypothetical Vision-Strategy-Action Plan for a Character Town.

Vision. The city's vision, hypothetically, is to be an interesting, pleasant and prosperous place for residents, businesses and visitors.

At the end of the day, all three parties have the same interests. Residents want a nice place to live and raise their families. Businesses have owners and employees who are residents and want what every resident wants. In addition, businesses need investors and they must retain and recruit employees, especially ones with "talent', they need a nice town to keep and attract high-value, high-skill workers. Visitors want to visit and stay in places that are interesting, pleasant and prosperous; so, their interests are the same as those of residents and businesses. The vision embraces the needs and wants of all three parties.

Strategy. Community vision drives the town's strategy. The overall strategy for remaining or becoming a character town is to direct all economic, social and physical forces and assets of the city to creating an interesting atmosphere and to drive prosperity and pleasantness. The city's overall strategy includes five <u>Strategic Objectives</u>:
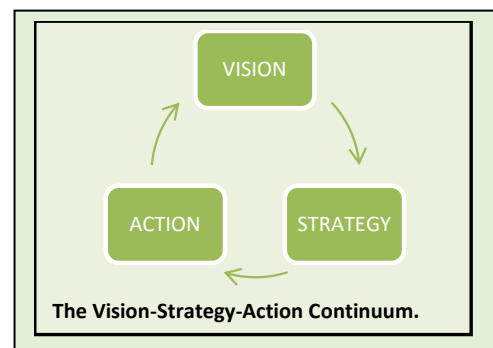
- Promote pleasantness by using physical assets, economic resources and civic institutions to create social capital based on sociability and civility.

The Vision-Strategy-Action Continuum.

- Pursue prosperity by being a pleasant and effective place for employers to live, grow their business, retain employees and recruit talent.
- Provide physical infrastructure to enhance social capital and support economic development.
- Preserve and enhance the city's natural, cultural and historic resources and amenities to create a pleasant and interesting place to live and learn, work and play.
- Undertake all actions to drive programs, policies, budgets and activities to enhance the city's vision.

Action Plans to Create Towns with Character. Initiate studies, plans and community meetings for city programs, policies, budgets and activities by**:**

- *First, building strong neighborhoods.* The places where people live form the foundational element of the community. Neighborhoods throughout the city must have a good mix of housing types and prices with safe and convenient access to neighborhood shopping, schools and parks. The old axiom is true - the city is no stronger than its weakest neighborhood.
- *Second, focusing on education.* Quality schools in every neighborhood are the starting point. Libraries, museums, galleries and recreation areas are important educational assets. Life-long learning can be a hallmark of a character town.
- *Third, acknowledging and enhancing vibrant mixed-use centers of activity, "main streets" and village centers*. Successful downtowns and village centers have a healthy mix of integrated uses, including residences, a good building stock with two to four story buildings, multi-modes of mobility

and amenities that facilitate formal and informal community gatherings. A successful downtown becomes an important element in a character town's financial model.

- **Fourth, energizing multi-use development corridors**. Development corridors, blighted or not, are economic engines that create sales and property tax revenues for the city, as well as jobs and family incomes. The are also, in most cases, the first visual impression visitors get when approaching the city be they tourists, prospective employees or investors.
  - Maximize their economic productivity by helping commercial strips transform themselves into vibrant urban corridors.
  - Enable a mix of uses. Whether individual sites are used for commercial, office, residential or civic along a busy corridor doesn't matter if properly buffered, connected and served through proper infrastructure and development standards. Like downtowns, successful development corridors create jobs, personal income, property taxes and user fees that support the city.
  - Enable intensification with supportive regulations and master parking and stormwater systems that enable infill and redevelopment.
- **Fifth, solidifying, modernizing and maintaining urban infrastructure**. Infrastructure includes the systems that support residential and economic life in the city. Sustainable physical improvements, social services and economic development are essential infrastructure. Services like utilities, access, stormwater, law enforcement, health care, social services, education and recreation are necessary to make collective living in an urban environment desirable. Comprehensive, long-range financial planning is the process to best direct the sources and uses of city funds.
- **Sixth, systematizing the city's open spaces.** Organize and connect upland and wetland preservation areas, school grounds, parks, stormwater ponds and waterways, lakefronts, streets and parking lots with trails and pathways. Every piece of the urban open space system should be an active or passive recreation area, a visual amenity and a functional piece of the city's open space system.
- **Seventh, simplifying the entitlement system and demand more from development using vision-driven standards and guidelines.**
  - Zoning deals with use. The use in neighborhoods is straight-forward. There are only two or three categories needed. Downtowns and other centers of activity have a mix of uses; development corridor property owners should be entitled to multiple uses. Only one zoning category is necessary with the emphasis on intensified mixed-use infill and redevelopment.
  - Development Standards provide density, intensity, buffer, setback, parking and stormwater standards sensitive to on-site functions and the impacts on adjacent properties.
  - Design Guidelines reflect the city's values regarding acceptable aesthetics, tastes and styles in development.
- **Eighth, institutionalizing a system for transparently measuring performance.**
  - Evaluating and measuring performance against vision-driven strategic objectives is the surest way to progress. The goal is timely feedback and critique that rises above punishment to the loftier, more effective purposes that foster education and innovation. The sooner problems or disturbing trends are discovered, the sooner they can be fixed; the sooner good news is known, the sooner opportunities can be leveraged.

- o   Performance evaluations used strictly for punitive purposes are short-sighted beyond comprehension. Evaluations that lead to learning, improvements and innovation are the foundation of a successful metric system for the enterprise.
- *Ninth, diversifying all aspects of community life.* Diversity is a big idea; it includes a diverse population, a wide variety of housing types, a multiplicity of travel modes, a diversity of landscapes and plants, multiple sources of energy and water, beauty in all things and an economic base with several strong industries that create a strong social, economic and physical setting for a sustainable character town.

Conclusions.

1. **Character counts.** Small cities and towns with personality, civility, authenticity, beauty and humor have a competitive advantage when families, visitors and businesses are deciding where to continue to live, to visit or to re-locate. Hometown pride, civic spirit and institutional trust are the core values of a character town.

2. **Small cities and towns with character are great places to live and learn, work and play.** The town's physical assets can be leveraged to create social capital and cultural resources that lead to economic development and community prosperity. Protect, enhance and grow in:
   - <u>Great neighborhoods</u> as strong assets for residents and for businesses seeking investment and recruiting new employees.
   - <u>Vibrant downtowns</u> for the benefit of everyone including prospective employees and businesses.
   - <u>Connections</u> to places in town and around the world by providing easy access for:
     - ☐ residents to fully engage with the town's schools and civic venues like parks, museums, theaters and libraries,
     - ☐ visitors to enjoy the town's history, culture, shops, cuisine and
     - ☐ businesses to participate in the global economy from a place that is attractive and connected when serving customers, investors or recruiting and retaining talent.
   - <u>Respected historic, cultural and natural resources</u> express the values of the town. The visual quality and technical proficiency of the city's schools, parks, theaters, museums and libraries are important to residents, businesses and visitors.
   - <u>Generational longevity deserves respect</u>, but character towns are open to new people.
   - <u>Diversifying all aspects of the community.</u>

3. **Leadership matters.** Effective leadership from community organizations is as important as it is from city management. Both function best with a robust system of civic engagement to plan the city, impose fair regulations, provide responsible infrastructure and be a good steward of the public's resources. Effective leaders set a strong tone for the town's future.

4. **Leverage is powerful.** Cross-leveraging the town's economic, social and physical attributes can build a successful community. Every part of the city is connected to every other part; collaboration of these elements creates true synergy.

5. **Cultural, natural and historic resources are the basis for community pride.** Schools, colleges, parks, theaters, museums, gardens and libraries form the core of the city's cultural asset base.

6. **Prosperity is important.** Economic prosperity depends on strong infrastructure, social and physical. Sustainable communities have a strong economic base and a viable city budget. Character towns are one of the best tools businesses have for retaining and recruiting talent.

7. **Sociability succeeds.** Character towns are the places we feel good about. Small cities and towns with character are growing in popularity with families, visitors and businesses. Community sociability and civility are foundational values of a character town.

8. **Beauty and fun are essential.** Towns known for their character are the result of much love and attention. Verdant and active networks of parks, paths, gardens and civic structures host community events that typify character towns. The visual impression of the town's neighborhoods, downtowns, schools and parks makes a strong impression on residents and visitors.

9. **Every town can remain or become a town with character.**
   - Existing towns with character have the basic building blocks and the emotional strength to preserve and enhance what they have. Constant vigilance is required.
   - Small cities and towns with little or no obvious character can chart a path of improvement over time. Cities will exist for centuries; hence, there is time to develop leadership and vision. A disciplined strategy applied with persistence is the critical factor. Character towns are made by strong visionary leaders.

11. **Specifically:**
   - **Be qualitative.** Use visioning to describe the enduring qualities desired by the town. Adjectives and adverbs are welcome.
   - **Be serious.** Take visioning and branding seriously with a ground-up, character-based approach.
   - **Be patient.** Don't rush the process. Time taken to delve into the depths of the town's being is time well spent. It is hard to make strategic or action plans without a consensus vision. Wait for consensus.
   - **Be intellectually connected.** Construct a visible intellectual thread that connects vision to strategy, strategy to action and therefore action to vision. Actions that visibly relate to the city's vision have an easier time finding community support.
   - **Be practical.** Budgets and regulations for vision-based actions are easier to approve than actions with no visible connection to a bigger idea.
   - **Be accountable.** Measure performance in a real-time, visible manner. Nothing builds trust like the vulnerability that comes with openly showing how plans and actions work out and then candidly discussing the outcomes. Dashboards that measure performance against established benchmarks are useful not to punish but to educate and learn. Real-time, transparent dashboards support the administration of the city and the engagement of its residents and businesses.

- **Be action oriented.** Character towns are the result of visionary thinkers and doers, in the past and in the present. Character doesn't just happen; it is envisioned and enacted by people who care about the town, its people and its future.

12. **Get started!** There are over 2,700 small cities and towns in America; opportunity awaits.

Be bold, think big…

"Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood and probably themselves will not be realized. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work, remembering that a noble, logical diagram once recorded will never die, but long after we are gone will be a living thing, asserting itself with ever-growing insistency. Remember that our sons and grandsons [not to mention our daughters and granddaughters] are going to do things that will stagger us. Let your watchword be order and your beacon beauty. Think big."

Daniel Burnham, Chicago architect. (1846-1912)

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