

## HIGH PERFORMANCE DEVELOPMENT CORRIDORS.

### The Thing about Commercial “Strips”.

**Prevailing conditions.** First, let’s be clear about our subject. The corridors of which we speak are roadways with blight strewn along their sides in the form of marginal businesses, uninviting restaurants, vacant and poorly maintained buildings, a wide array of gaudy signs, excessive driveway cuts and disorganized parking lots with too few trees. They are ugly to view, dangerous to drive and generally poor contributors to the city’s economic and employment base. Their vacant lands and buildings are unproductive economic assets for their owners and the city.

**The emotional impact of “strips”.** More importantly, being located at the center of town or at its entrances, their poor image is a drag on the psyche of the community. The obviously blighted strips represent the values of the host community. They are a source of disappointment to every resident and business owner on their daily commutes and to visitors passing through town.

### ***Characterization of Blighted Commercial Strips***

**Corridors usually accommodate:**

- Regional traffic that creates congestion, but also provides customer visibility,
- Property access to roadside commercial including single family houses converted to commercial use, apartments, offices, “big boxes” and general commercial and industrial uses and activities; personal storage and small warehouses, high schools, car lots and other uses not acceptable elsewhere in the city,
- Utility corridors for swale drainage, stormwater ponds with chain-link fencing, electric and telephone lines,
- Signs in a wide variety of tastes; marginal and poorly maintained businesses, often with outside storage.

**Corridors are, essentially, “anything goes” development zones with:**

- Wide ranging uses and activities arranged at random,
- Low, or no, development standards and design guidelines,
- No access control, interconnected parking areas or frontage roads,
- No visible interest in aesthetics through sign control, landscaping or site planning,
- No organization like a merchants’ association or property owners’ association to foster a better idea.

**Corridors have the potential for increasing their generation of:**

- Jobs and family incomes,
- Property tax and sales tax receipts for the city.

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The commercial corridors one travels when entering town foretell the character of the place. Well organized, nicely maintained and generally occupied buildings along the highway with more than an occasional tree raise the visitors’ expectations about what will be found ahead. However, in many towns, commercial strips have generally been neglected or relegated as an area of town where anything goes, even when the “strip” is in the middle of town. Blighted strip development at the entryway to the city creates a bad first impression to prospective residents, visitors and employers and a damper on the enthusiasm of existing residents and business owners.

**The traditional role of the “strip”.** The traditional role of the commercial strips in America is complex. Though ugly, dangerous unproductive, they must have served a purpose once upon a time since we have so of them. The economic value that led to their development can be used for the resurgence. locations are still great.

Commercial strips are one of the last bastions laissez-faire development in America: under-regulated, under-designed, under-valued, under-served and under-performing. Yet, they highly visible; often serving as the front door the community. They are “too big to completely fail” yet “too sad to save.”

**Today’s commercial strip is a distortion of once productive commercial corridor.** Nobody intended to develop ugly, dangerous places in the heart of the city, but as downtowns lost their vigor, the highway commercial frontages were the most valuable in many towns. They were ravenously developed and succeeded until neglect and competition led to their current blighted, dangerous and under-performing state of being.

**Problems to overcome.** The practicalities of changing the bad dynamics of a blighted commercial strip are daunting. There are a thousand reasons why the effort will fail, but success comes from a determined program based on an effective approach as outlined below. The obstacles to overcome, to list but a few, are: un-motivated property owners, ineffective incentives, un-motivated local elected and appointed officials, weak economic and financial markets and general community apathy. They say: “Once you’ve seen something seven times, you no longer see it”.

**Appreciate the positive.** As revenue generators for governments, businesses and families, these heavily travelled corridors are valuable community assets, despite years of neglect and abuse. Their locations are generally superb and their underlying market value remains intact.



Corridors serve many masters.



Pavers don't solve every problem.



Corridors serve all food groups.

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The city's business model should demand more from them. In order to be more economically and socially productive, the corridors need to be more attractive, more inviting and safer.

### Highway Corridors as High-Performing Development Districts.

**A basic element of the city.** Corridors are an essential element of every city; the only question is whether they are attractive and economically productive, or not. Corridors are the connective tissue that accommodate regional traffic and connect the city's neighborhoods, mixed-use centers, single purpose specialty districts and open spaces.

**Vision.** Envision the entry into town that gives residents and visitors the appearance of a pleasant and prosperous community...the one opportunity to create a first and lasting impression.

### The Value of Sites in Corridors

The promise of existing corridors lies in their fundamental value. Corridors are still critical as:

- Well-located, high traffic-count business sites,
- Generators of sales and property taxes for local governments, jobs and incomes for families, connectors between neighborhoods and city centers,
- Places for a wide variety of uses controlled with proper standards and guidelines.

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Corridors can survive trees; and  
Trees can survive corridors.

### Characteristics of a High Performance "District"

The essential characteristics of a high performing district are:

- A multiplicity of engaged stakeholders: property owners, private and public,
- A common vision, theme or purpose that binds together most or all entities in the district,
- A community-wide recognition that the district exists,
- Identifiable borders, gateways and edges to the district that can be specifically defined,
- A generally accepted name commonly used in the community to identify the district,
- A consensus among the stakeholders that the resources and activities in the district require some level of management.

Characteristics sometimes present within high performing districts are:

- Aesthetic consistency with design standards for landscaping, signs and graphics,
- Internally cohesive transportation systems for vehicles, parking, pedestrians, bikes, buses and trams,
- District-wide communication networks with websites, newsletters, meetings and events,
- Recurring funding, taxation or fee-based systems for district maintenance and operations,
- A centralized management organization working on issues of common interest: security and emergency management; stormwater management, parking and wayfinding systems; streets, transit, pedways, bikeways and tram systems; parks and open spaces; trees and beautification; energy and water conservation; information technology, marketing and communication systems.

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Envision the improvement of existing blighted corridors and the perpetuation of existing prosperous commercial corridors. A preservation and redevelopment strategy employs available tools already applied downtown.

**Conditions for success.** Districts that become high performers need several things to go right:

- The market needs to be strong,
- Infrastructure needs to be available,
- Intensities and densities of land use need to be easily increased with a broad mix of permitted uses including residential and limited manufacturing uses,
- Reasonable standards for enhanced site planning, signage and landscaping that lead to improvements without becoming onerous; strict code enforcement is essential,
- A sensitive approach to “grandfather” issues for older sites that do not, and cannot, meet newer codes for parking and stormwater management, and
- A commitment from city government to better quality development that protects the “pioneers” who invest in the district with higher standards from being dragged back into a blighted setting enabled by future waivers under pressure from existing owners.

### Approaches to Redevelopment.

The trick is to transform a blighted commercial strip into a successful multiple use development corridor that performs its functions by providing business, civic and housing sites that warrant investment and contribute to the prosperity of the host city.

**The Urban Land Institute’s Ten Principles for Reinventing America’s Suburban Strips** is a great place to start. The authors have taken the concepts used in downtown redevelopment and applied them to strip commercial corridors.

The key ingredients for successful infill and redevelopment are:

- **Infrastructure.** It is essential for building and site rehabilitation, new infill and redevelopment. Funding is the driver for the infrastructure improvement program.
- **Entitlements.** These dictate what uses can be included in the redevelopment scheme and how they must be designed. In general, the range of uses are broad; standards are tight.

***ULI’s Ten Principles for Reinventing America’s Suburban Strips***

1. Ignite Leadership and Nurture Partnerships
2. Anticipate Evolution
3. Know the Market
4. Prune Back Retail-Zoned Land
5. Establish Pulse Nodes of Development
6. Tame the Traffic
7. Create the Place
8. Diversify the Character
9. Eradicate the Ugliness
10. Put Your Money (and Regulations) Where Your Policy Is.

**Source: *Ten Principles for Reinventing America’s Suburban Strips*, by Michael D. Beyard and Michael Pawlukiewicz, published by the Urban Land Institute.**

- **Funding.** Funds can be a self-imposed business improvement district [BID] tax approved by property owners supplemented with a tax increment funding [TIF] program. Impact fee and user fee credits can also fund infrastructure necessary to support new investment.
- **Beauty.** Always a plus. Trees are the main element of any redevelopment program. Saving existing trees and planting new ones is an incredibly important and productive investment.

**The Main Street Program** offers a supplemental process to contribute to the desired outcome. The program’s formula of organization, promotion, design and economic re-structuring is a proven method to invigorate merchants and downtown property owners with a spirit of rejuvenation. This same technique can be used on blighted strip commercial zones.

### ***The Main Street Program***

**Approach** – As a unique economic development tool, the Main Street Four Point Approach® is the foundation for local initiatives to revitalize districts by leveraging local assets – from cultural or architectural heritage to local enterprises and community pride. The four points of the Main Street program that work together to build a sustainable and complete community revitalization effort are:

- Organization
- Promotion
- Design
- Economic restructuring

Coincidentally, the four points of the Main Street Program correspond with the four forces of real estate value, which are the social, political, physical and economic features of a property.

**Source: National Trust for Historic Preservation.**

The two definitive sources on the subject are:

- ***Ten Principles for Reinventing America’s Suburban Strips***, by Michael D. Beyard and Michael Pawlukiewicz, published by the Urban Land Institute; cited above.
- ***Designing Urban Corridors***, by Kirk R. Bishop, American Planning Association; PAS Report Number 418, 1989, cited below.

#### **PAS #418, “Designing Urban Corridors”.**

The literature from APA that addresses the needs of urban corridors is sparse. The classic study was authored in 1989 by Kirk Bishop. It is entitled “*Designing Urban Corridors*”, cited below. The paucity of studies reflects the general neglect of the subject which reflects the general neglect of the resource – the corridors themselves. Most useful information is found in specific corridor redevelopment plans and studies. APA provides many in **PAS EIP-29, Commercial Corridor Revitalization**; discussed below.





## Designing Urban Corridors

Kirk R. Bishop produced *Designing Urban Corridors* in 1989 just as the movement towards mixed-use urban development emerged along with the growing appreciation for the mutual dependency of transportation and land use planning. The founding of CNU was still four years in the future. Mr. Bishop’s work was forward thinking and practical. He put forth “general and specific techniques [that] can be effectively used to improve or preserve the character of corridors.” His recommendations:

- Think big, but begin with a focus.
- Don’t cast too many stones until your own house is in order.
- Remove regulatory barriers that impede innovative site design and land-use planning.
- Be firm about goals and flexible about how to attain them.
- Adopt a street tree program.
- Don’t ignore the relationship between traffic circulation and land use.

Source: *Designing Urban Corridors*, Kirk R. Bishop, American Planning Association; PAS Report Number 418, 1989.

**PAS EIP – 29, Commercial Corridor Revitalization** is an American Planning Association Planning Advisory Services [PAS] packet of articles and documents from the APA library on specific subjects such as this one on Commercial Corridor Revitalization. This packet includes five articles, four guidebooks, five corridor revitalization plans, three form-based codes and six corridor overlay zoning codes. Each article and document is very comprehensive and covers the full range of issues one would expect.

### Tools and Processes for Corridor Redevelopment.

The lessons have already been learned. The tools and processes available to city leaders interested in improving the blighted condition on corridors are generally the same tools and processes used for decades by small cities and towns to revitalize their downtowns:

- visioning,
- expanded entitlements,
- demanding standards,
- urban infrastructure improvements,
- finance plans,
- property assembly.



Reinvestment opportunity: Before.



Reinvestment opportunity: After.

**A Comprehensive Long-Range Redevelopment Plan** is the traditional vehicle for organizing and executing the redevelopment program driven by a Work Plan. This planning can happen concurrent with the work of the Community Redevelopment Agency [CRA] and other affiliates.

**Visioning.** The stakeholders along the corridor are the ones to initiate a redevelopment program. Their sustained commitment is essential to the success of the effort. The vision can be elaborate or straightforward, but its authenticity is important.

**Strategy.** The basic approach is to consider a “strip”, or blighted commercial corridor, just like a dilapidated downtown. Stakeholders need to step forward with a “big idea”, a plan needs to be made for redevelopment and new investment, the city needs to be supportive and a plan of action needs to be constructed to tap market demand, employ the city’s redevelopment tools, and establish a comprehensive long-range finance plan for the district.

The plan of action includes programs and the necessary land development code and budget arrangements for: redevelopment-oriented entitlements, urban infrastructure, financing, property assembly and a perpetual organization to direct and maintain the district.

**Development Entitlements.** The uses permitted in the designated district can include many activities. A multiplicity of uses is warranted when accompanied by development standards and design guidelines that establish buffers, site plan specifications, access management standards, landscape specifications and infrastructure requirements.

Encouraging re-investment entails offering access to market uses through future land use designations and zoning uses. In general:

- **Uses** should be broadly defined to include housing, retail, offices, limited manufacturing, civic and institutional activities, such as hospitals, libraries, museums, colleges and universities. Uses are not as important to regulate as site development and aesthetics with development guidelines and design guidelines.
- **Development Standards** set minimums for the provision of services and facilities for development. The standards should be the standard requirements necessary for community health, safety, welfare and appearance. Deviations from these standards should be scrutinized closely. Every waiver sets the new standard for others; usually at a lower level.
- **Design Guidelines** set the tone for aesthetics through suggestions for architecture, landscape architecture and site engineering ideas.

**Infrastructure.** The full range of urban infrastructure is required. Special conditions may be warranted when existing development was built before contemporary parking and stormwater standards were imposed. In many cases, redevelopment projects cannot meet these new standards. An accommodation is to use “master systems” that enable properties to be improved and city standards to be met.

**Finance Tools.** The town may offer the public financing tools of the town to a private developer for infrastructure development that benefits the development and the public. Special districts may be offered that generate new money [a BID] and re-distribute existing money [CRA/TIF]. A comprehensive long-range finance plan for redevelopment examines all existing and potential sources and uses of funds, leave nothing off the table:

- Business improvement districts, community redevelopment districts with tax increment funding programs and other special overlay taxing districts,
- Impact fees and utility connection fees and credits,
- Developer funding and donations of property, such as right-of-way and
- Funding from state and federal agencies through special grants or general expenditures.

**Property Assembly.** Most “strips” have been chopped up into small parcels. As a typical example, a twelve mile long commercial corridor on U.S. 17-92 in Seminole County, Florida had 1,269 parcels; the vast majority had separate owners and were less than an acre in size.

Unless the city is prepared to use its eminent domain powers, which most are not, then another way to encourage, incentivize and enable the assembly of property must be offered. Flexible alternatives to comply with contemporary stormwater and parking requirements are pieces of the puzzle.

**Process.** The process for transforming existing “strips” into productive corridors is described below. An allied process involves re-purposing abandoned shopping malls. Creativity and flexibility are critical ingredients to any “fixer-upper” project, especially if it is a multi-owner mall or “commercial strip”.



U.S. 441, Tavares, FL



## Conclusions.

### 1. Prepare for success.

- Respond favorably to responsible “pioneer” stakeholders who dream of an improved corridor.
- Know the market.
- Articulate the dream in the form of a compelling vision to activate the community.
- Broaden and organize stakeholder participation.
- Enlist the assistance of adjacent neighborhoods with commitments for their protection.

### 2. Assemble and employ the necessary resources.

- Continue to refine the “big idea” with comprehensive and long-range thinking that embraces diversity and connectivity.
- Identify stakeholders who are prepared to become actively engaged as leaders.
- Solidify city support remembering that the City, CRA or other outside entity cannot lead the effort.
- Create a permanent organization.
- Identify a distinct district for redevelopment.
- Prepare a unified plan of development; approach the multi-owner district as a single entity, just like a Planned Unit Development [PUD] .
- Leverage city and other outside support including BID and CRA special districts.

### 3. Begin implementation from the start.

- Find the “low hanging fruit” and begin to build a record of accomplishment on the first day.
- Take meaningful action, early and often.
- Develop a habit of constant communication and absorption of ideas and information that is inclusive and transparent; build the constituency.
- Beautify whenever possible with trees, landscaping, sign de-cluttering, organized parking and a simplified system of circulation.
- Enlist assistance from city departments: police, fire department, code enforcement, health and others that directly interface with local businesses and residents.
- Initiate celebrations, festivals, public art and music that attract people to the district.
- Issue an annual report in a public ceremony to celebrate successes and re-challenge the group on issues of less success. The key is to have the redevelopment program be a community event with all the stakeholders contributing and benefitting from their collective work.



Roadside “power box” art and artist.

## ***The Process for Transforming Blighted Commercial Strips into Productive Multi-Use Development Corridors***

1. **Someone Takes a Chance:** Someone who cares to change the status quo must step forward. It can be a property owner or a business owner in the district. A group of two or three ambitious people is better than a single missionary. The city cannot be the leader; it must support but it cannot lead. The process has to start with someone who is on a mission to stake out a better future.
2. **Express a Vision:** The leader will have a mission, a vision; a story about a different future. The city can provide early support by preparing a sketch plan that graphically presents the stakeholders' vision for the corridor. A drawing is really helpful to engage people in a community conversation on the future of their surroundings. Early enactment of development standards and design guidelines helps.
3. **Broaden "Stakeholder" Participation:** The initial leadership group identifies and recruits additional people who also have a stake in the future of the corridor – property owners, business owners, city officials, utility companies, and other interested groups. Broader based groups have more power.
4. **Organize:** The broadened stakeholder group establishes an "Exploratory Committee" of 5 to 7 interested leaders, endorsed by the city, to set a participatory process in motion for the "stakeholders" and the city.
5. **Find Start-up Money:** Initial financial support for the Exploratory Committee is critical. Loans or grants from interested parties matched by the city are an option. Total public funding sets the wrong tone for a stakeholder-driven process.
6. **Scope the Work:** To initiate community discussions and articulate a direction for the transformation of the commercial strip into a productive urban corridor:
  - Identify the preliminary boundaries of the corridor that will form the "district",
  - Solidify the participation of stakeholders and facilitate their active participation,
  - Develop an initial consensus vision for rejuvenating the district based on "all call" meetings of stakeholders,
  - Secure continuing funding for the permanent organization's operations,
  - Develop concepts for the district long-range finance plan at the start.
7. **Form a Permanent Organization:**
  - Establish a permanent committee or board sanctioned by the host city government,
  - Establish committee bylaws, and communicate, constantly, with all district stakeholders.
8. **Prepare a District Redevelopment Plan:**
  - Understand the existing and potential market for goods and services offered in the District,
  - Prepare a future land use, circulation and open space plan with development standards for the District,
  - Align the comprehensive plan, land development regulations, development standards and design guidelines to support redevelopment,
  - Prepare a *Comprehensive Long-Range Finance Plan* for the district that identifies sources and uses of funds necessary to support redevelopment activities of existing businesses and new development,
  - Develop marketing programs to recruit new businesses along with financial, infrastructure and processing incentives to encourage the appropriate private investment in the District.
9. **Appreciate and Leverage the "power of beauty".**

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