

Better Models for Development in the Shenandoah Valley 2010



Meeting
21st Century
Challenges



Updated and Expanded
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Six Principles for Better Development

1. Conserve Natural and Scenic Assets

The first principle of developing the Valley should be identifying where not to develop. The region's natural and scenic assets can be enjoyed by all—or destroyed by the careless decisions of a few. Successful communities identify the most important natural and scenic resources and develop policies to protect these features. The linchpin of protecting natural areas is to retain the working landscapes, the farms and forests that automatically enhance scenic views, protect natural systems, and contribute to the economic vitality of our communities.

2. Conserve As You Grow

As a community develops, it can conserve the lands necessary to maintain the integrity of its rural landscape, natural systems, and special places. Natural resources are certainly priceless, but the benefits they provide also have significant monetary value. “Growing in, not out” can help keep our communities sustainable both environmentally and fiscally. In fact, investing in “green infrastructure” is just as important as planning for other kinds of infrastructure. Within growth areas, much can be done to design in ways that mitigate environmental impact and protect water quality, farmland, historic sites, and other features.

3. Build Livable Communities

Villages, towns, and cities can absorb most of the growth in the Valley. Creating attractive and livable communities is the essential counterpoint to protecting the rural areas of the Valley. Building livable communities means rejuvenating and extending the traditional cores that are the heart and soul of Valley communities. Opportunities abound to build from within and all local policies can encourage this

focus. Economic realities, health experts, demographic trends, and rising energy costs all point to the advantages of a more efficient style of development: compact, connected, multi-use neighborhoods. Good design can make these places convenient and vibrant, where people of all ages and income can live, work, and play.

4. Preserve Historic Resources

The Valley's rich history is still evident in a wealth of historic and archaeological sites in rural areas as well as in the communities. Using and protecting these settings connects us to our past. Historic preservation also generates jobs and attracts tourists.

5. Respect Local Character in New Construction

The bulk of recent building in America is just plain junk. New buildings can either complement the character of Shenandoah Valley communities or they can turn the Valley into “Anyplace USA.” Communities can do more to ensure that new construction respects local character. The Valley's natural setting, historical development pattern, and architectural traditions make this a distinctive place. Localities can develop standards that make sure new designs fit this character.

6. Reduce the Impact of the Car

Reducing the impact of the car means providing more choices. Greater connections and facilities for walking, biking, and transit make it easy to get around without a car, supporting healthy lifestyles and increasing the independence of young and old alike. Transportation facilities, from roads to bridges, can be designed to be sensitive to their context as well as functional.

Principle 2: CONSERVE AS YOU GROW

Conserve Well, Develop Well

Incorporating conservation into development plans helps us protect the natural environment and at the same time create a more functional and enjoyable human environment. We can conserve as we grow.



Standard development (left) overrides natural features, requiring massive facilities to handle stormwater. By contrast (right), development can weave distinctive living and community space in with stormwater facilities like this vegetated bioretention basin (Newtown, Williamsburg).

AS A COMMUNITY DEVELOPS, it can conserve lands to help maintain the integrity of its rural areas, natural systems, and special places. These conserved areas will become increasingly invaluable over the long run. Planning for conservation recognizes that people as well as nature need the things that only undeveloped land can supply, like clean air and water, affordable stormwater and flood control, farm and forest products, recreation, and the scenic and cultural treasures that define our region and renew the spirit. It makes sense to conserve strategic locations that can deliver these values and safeguard them for the future.

Conserve well, build well sets a double goal of developing very well in suitable locations and conserving very well in areas that provide other essential values. The key is identifying and being clear on these values

“Ultimately, the best way to preserve natural habitats is through the excellent design of human habitat.”

Smart Growth America,
Choosing Our Community's Future

so that the community recognizes and supports their protection. Just as development can be done well, so should conservation.

Good conservation planning is an investment. Investing in conservation is investing in the long-term health of our communities. That investment value is compounded because conserved land underpins related efforts like keeping the agricultural sector viable, providing services efficiently, maintaining local character as the base for tourism, and offering opportunities for recreation.

Conservation pays. There are many reasons to conserve open space, many of them economic. In particular are the specific “ecosystem services,” or benefits that people obtain from healthy ecosystems. These benefits are priceless in many ways, but also have a dollar value that can be recognized in evaluating projects and setting policies.

“Conserve well, build well” means reinforcing the distinctive values that can be provided by conservation on the one hand and by well-designed development on the other. Conserving well involves identifying locations with important values (such as scenic, natural habitat, flood control, prime farmland, urban forest, streamside areas) and protecting those values. Developing well involves making the most of areas that are well suited to development, by using land and resources efficiently and by using designs that enhance quality of life. The aim is to avoid the middle ground, a characterless blob that so often overrides both natural features and distinct places. Maintaining a clear edge between town and countryside is one way of expressing this concept. Even within a single development project, decisions can be made to conserve features of the site, often in ways that add value overall.

Planning for conservation works at all scales. Three different scales are discussed in this chapter.

2. Conserve As You Grow

- **Landscape Scale** – Maintaining a clear edge between town and countryside can help buffer rural areas from development pressure and encourage better development in growth areas. Reducing sprawl or “growing in, not out” is the key to retaining the region’s agricultural and natural heritage. More broadly, maintaining a clear edge can be understood as enhancing the complementary values of natural and built areas.
- **Community Scale** – Using “green infrastructure” concepts to identify strategic conservation resources can lead to growth policies and plans that protect special places and are sustainable fiscally and environmentally.
- **Site Scale** – Designing individual projects to protect natural function (“environmental site design”) goes a long way to avoiding the cumulative impacts that can damage the environment. Likewise, open space development design offers the opportunity to cluster development on just part of a site and leave protected other features, such as prime farmland, forest, stream zones, or historic structures.

Principle 3: BUILD LIVABLE COMMUNITIES



Farmland can grow only so many houses. Livable communities with the right mix of design and density such as this one in Williamsburg (right) become even more convenient and vital as they gain residents, dwellings, businesses, and services.

THE IMPORTANT FLIP SIDE of not developing the countryside is building attractive places to live in the areas where growth is desired and can be accommodated. This means growing better, not just bigger. Accomplishing this will require transforming our development processes.

Development screeched to a halt in 2008. When it comes back, what form will it take?

Sprawl has been a bad choice, not just for the countryside but for communities. Developing in a spread out, land-consumptive fashion converts more productive farm and forest and affects more natural resources than necessary. Public investments in roads, utilities, and services also are more costly and inefficient when spread over a greater area to serve a given population.

Those communities that learn from the current economic crisis will be ready to develop in a different and more efficient way. They will take down some of the barriers to better development. There are more reasons than ever to do this.

Never waste a crisis ... With markets down, now is the time to position ourselves for a new economy based on sustainability."

Housing and demographics researcher,
Arthur C. Nelson, 2009

One is to respond to changes in market demand. Some suburban-lot development will always take place, but diverting a portion of new development into compact patterns can provide new options for residents and better meet community goals.

Many communities have put concepts like "walkable communities" in their comprehensive plans. The most difficult—though essential—step is putting in place the ordinances and policies to make it easier to build developments with these desired characteristics. This shift will demand more of local governments and the community planning process than ever before.

See the following pages for examples of compact, connected, mixed-use, human scale development projects.

The Coming Demand for Walkable Neighborhoods

3. Build Livable Communities

DEMOGRAPHICS AND CONSUMER PREFERENCES

point to significant shifts in what kinds of housing consumers will want in the future. These trends will drive an increased market share for compact, walkable neighborhoods.

- America's population is expected to grow by 94 million between 2000 and 2030.
- About half of the homes, office buildings, stores, and factories needed by 2030 do not exist today, according to a 2004 Brookings Institution report. ***This is an opportunity to reshape future development.***
- Already more than 75 percent of home buyers do not have school-aged children. The coming need is for housing for retirees, empty nesters, single parents, and unrelated singles.
- Both the "age wave" of baby boomers and the younger generations are trending toward smaller households and a preference for smaller attached housing with urban amenities.
- People do not want more auto dependence. Nearly 90% of those polled in a 2007 survey sponsored by the National Association of Realtors® and Smart Growth America said new communities should be designed so we can walk more and drive less, and that public transportation should be improved and accessible.
- A survey cited in the *Journal of the American Planning Association* in 2008 found that 42% to 59% of all households want "new urban" neighborhood characteristics.
- No more "McMansions" needed? A 2007 study by former Virginia Tech housing and demographic

expert Arthur C. Nelson predicted that by 2025, the nation will need 35 million more attached and small-lot housing units, but the demand for large-lot houses will be below our current supply.

- Houses with above-average walkability command a premium of \$4,000 to \$34,000 over houses with just average levels of walkability in typical metropolitan areas, according to "Walking the Walk: How Walkability Raises Housing Values in U.S. Cities" a 2009 study for CEOs for Cities.
- A study published in the *Journal of Planning Education and Research* in 2005 surveyed residents in Atlanta and Boston and found a huge unmet demand for walkable and transit-friendly locations.



Condominiums in the former YMCA in Staunton have been popular among those downsizing for convenience and lifestyle. Winchester, Lexington, and Harrisonburg have seen similar projects.

Design for Healthy Communities

LOOK AROUND YOUR COMMUNITY. Is everyone in a car? Health experts recommend 60 minutes of exercise a day for children and 30 minutes for adults. How can people incorporate that into their daily lives? Studies show that even routine trips on foot can add up to the recommended amount.

Community environments that make it safe and easy to get exercise could enable millions of sedentary Americans to integrate physical activity into their lives seamlessly, according to a 2001 report published by the Commission on Local Government.

A sedentary lifestyle, according to a U.S. Surgeon's report, is a primary factor in 10 percent of all deaths in the United States. Center for Disease Control researchers say that direct and indirect costs associated with physical inactivity may total more than \$150 billion annually.

“People can control their own behavior up to a point, but decisions on more complicated issues that affect lifestyle behavior, such as those involving development practices, are best addressed through community-wide efforts.”

Local Government Commission report on
Development and Health



Typical apartment complex with no open space

The way we're building is not good for kids. The American Academy of Pediatrics links community design to overall children's health. It issued a policy statement in 2009 calling on governments at all levels to plan for and invest in walkable, livable communities that best advance the health, safety, and well-being of American families.

Only 10 percent of children walk or bicycle to school, compared with a majority of children a generation ago.

The influential bestseller *Last Child in the Woods* diagnosed a nation of kids with “nature-deficit disorder.” Outdoor play in a natural setting can help with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. A 2004 study in the *American Journal of Public Health* found attention improved more in kids who took a 20-minute stroll in a park than in kids who walked where greenery was sparse. British researchers reported in 2010 that even brief activity in a green place has large benefits for mental health, especially in children.

Nor is it good for seniors. Nearly 50 percent of adults age 50 and older report they cannot cross main roads close to their home safely says the 2009 AARP report, “Planning Complete Streets for an Aging America.”



Townhouses on green in Newtown, Williamsburg

Gas Stations and Convenience Stores

5. Respect Local Character



Typical station with huge, brightly colored canopy



Amoco canopy and building in traditional materials, Crozet



DAVID KLEPPINGER

Texaco canopy within the roofline, Hanover County



Two-story canopy, Albemarle County



RANDALL ARENDT

Mobil with gas canopy in rear, W. Kingston, RI



New service station, Vermont



Liberty with traditional design and muted colors, Nelson County



Sheetz with landscaping and brick building, Staunton

Principle 6: REDUCE THE IMPACT OF THE CAR

Design for People, Not Just Cars



JOHN MIRABELLA

Shouldn't transportation projects enhance neighborhoods and quality of life in the communities they serve? Whereas concrete barriers (left) mark so many new bridges, Lexington made sure its rebuilt bridge (right) has a bike lane and the same attractive, open railings as before.

EACH YEAR VIRGINIA COMMUNITIES approve local road plans reflecting very real needs. However, the designs that typically result are not always what people want. Road projects “built to the standards” often damage scenery, livability, and community character. They are designed to move traffic faster, but at the expense of everything else.

While ugly, overscaled highway projects are familiar to us all, fortunately transportation agencies are now shifting away from rigid design and single focus on motor vehicles. There has long been a need to reassess road standards and to make designs that give us more transportation choices and more livable communities.

“Our most valued places are often sites which lack our most valued possession: cars.”

David Sucher, *City Comforts*

Virginia has made important policy changes in recent years that lead in this direction. These are some of the current trends in new transportation design approaches and standards:

Flexibility in Design. Federal transportation legislation gives states the flexibility to use their own design standards in sensitive locations. Federal law also makes it clear that highway projects should be designed with social, environmental, and cultural resources in mind. The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) gives field staff more leeway for flexibility than in the past. Localities can ask for designs that accommodate what is important to the community.

Context Sensitive Solutions (CSS). This collaborative approach aims to “think beyond the pavement” to ensure that transportation facilities are designed to fit their setting. By involving stakeholders and by focusing on the local context, the CSS process can help preserve cultural and environmental assets.