



What Is a Town Center?

A town center is a compact area with a mix of retail, office, commercial, and housing that serves as a gateway to the community and that provides a central location for community activity.

Description

Since the beginning of recorded human history, town centers have been the focal point of community activity. In the broadest sense, town centers are concentrated areas of commercial, residential, and political activity that meet basic human needs for goods and services, housing, and civic participation. Depending on their purpose and location, they may also be hubs for jobs, transportation, entertainment, or recreation. Town centers come in various shapes and sizes and include everything from urban downtown areas to small town Main Streets.

Town centers are generally characterized by mixed-use development, which integrates several different land uses such as retail stores, restaurants, residences, civic buildings, offices, and parks. Residential areas adjacent to the area often include elements of traditional neighborhood design, which incorporates such features as narrower residential streets, alleyways for delivery and service access, entry doors and porches facing the street, detached garages located to the rear of the home, and architectural styles appropriate to the local landscape and culture.

Well-designed town centers are easily accessible by area residents, are pedestrian friendly, and provide a gateway to other parts of the community.

Considerations

Town Centers are logical places for dense housing development because of their nearness to transit, shopping, and employment. They often offer community services such as libraries and civic offices, and so can act as social gathering places where people take advantage of cultural and recreational activities. Because they provide a shared space for citizens to interact, they can provide a strong sense of community identity and pride. In addition, because town centers are characterized by more compact development, well-designed town centers can allow for significant growth in a smaller rural community without compromising rural character or utilizing large areas of farmland or open space. Creation or redesign of a town center can also be coupled with transfer of development rights programs (*see Fact Sheet No. 9*), with the town center acting as the receiving zone and outlying areas acting as sending zones. In places where no town center previously existed, creation of a new town center should involve community dialogue and commitment to the project, as well as broad agreement on community goals, before such an undertaking is initiated.

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Where It Is Working

A number of small communities in the metro area have thriving town centers that serve to anchor the community and create a shared sense of identity. Locally, Red Wing and Northfield provide good examples of established town centers in smaller towns.

In addition, many communities in the Twin Cities metropolitan area are taking advantage of Livable Communities grants from the Metropolitan Council to create new town centers or redevelop outdated existing town centers. For example, the Village Project in Brooklyn Park involves the redesign of an 80-acre downtown area to create a mix of uses in a pedestrian- and transit-oriented environment. The Heart of the City project in Burnsville involves the creation of a mixed-use center and new downtown in an underutilized area of the city. The Village on the Ponds project in Chanhassen will include the development of 300+ housing units and commercial and office spaces, as well as the relocation of a church and school, in an area adjacent to downtown Chanhassen. Circle Pines' City Center Redevelopment is a 14-acre site where the city envisions creating a community gateway and city center, preserving mixed uses, and increasing life-cycle housing options through new housing or rehabilitation. Finally, a project in Maple Grove will use 600 acres of a reclaimed gravel mining area to develop a pedestrian-oriented village around a plaza, with integrated residential, commercial, and office uses and a 30-acre community park.