



An evaluation of Master Plans and their Land-Use Elements

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Fall 2013 MRP Planning Studio - Master Plan Assessments: Evaluating Land Use Elements



The Fall 2013 Regional Planning Studio course, led by Dr. Darrel Ramsey-Musolf, examined Massachusetts municipalities in order to evaluate the Land-Use Element of their Master Plans. The class of fifteen students were randomized into teams of three, and each team chose two municipalities to explore. The teams created a planning consultancy firm, devised a mission statement, and negotiated agreements regarding work expectancy and dispute resolution. Each team read their municipalities Master Plan's Introduction, Executive Summary, and Land-Use Element. Following this, each team conducted a site visit that then informed "gut" assessment of their examined municipalities.

The "gut" assessments asked: Is a town's recent development (i.e., the last five to ten years) consistent with the land-use goals, objectives, and policies of the town's Master Plan. If a Master Plan was written within the last five years, the group explored whether the Master Plan addressed land-use deficiencies that were identified in the site visit. The municipalities presented themes of downtown revitalization, commercial development, sustaining tourism, sprawl, adaptive reuse, spurring growth and creation of a creative economy.

Athena Consulting Group



West Springfield



West Springfield



Easthampton

Land Use Goals

The primary mission of both West Springfield and Easthampton is to control the loss of greenfield areas to low-density, residential development. Each town already experiences substantial growth from sprawl and they accordingly address its discouragement in their land use plans. West Springfield, arguably the most affected of the two, states in its goals that development should be in areas already developed via infill and changes to zoning to permit greater density. This meant to address both efficiency, with the use of existing infrastructure, and the preservation of open space. Its measurement of success in this goal is by the vibrancy of its downtown. Easthampton explicitly features the downtown in its plan as the place to best accommodate denser development along existing infrastructure. Its priority is to upzone the downtown and the plan acknowledges this as a prerequisite for allowing the higher density. A particularly useful goal is to allow by-right residential development in outlying areas for smaller lot sizes and frontages. However, the plan designates two areas for downzoning and for the allowance of significantly larger lot sizes.

Team Focus

Athena Consulting Group decided to explore two municipalities in the Pioneer Valley that were under a thirty minute drive from each other. Their choosing of West Springfield and Easthampton allowed for an analysis of proximate towns with different land use approaches, but with similar challenges relating to low-density development. The team decided to use their initial site visits to witness the respective communities' development patterns with an eye towards encouraging signs in their most dense areas.

Observations

If West Springfield's barometer of success in curbing its sprawl is the healthiness of its downtown, it likely needs additional time or adjustments to its land use plan. Its downtown is not being used to its full potential. It generally caters only to people who work downtown, and is surrounded by lanes of traffic, as well as excessive parking areas. West Springfield's older industrial area appears to be mostly abandoned and underutilized. Perhaps, Easthampton can offer examples of how explicit designation of a downtown for densification can lead to better momentum. In contrast, Easthampton had a cohesive, active and pedestrian-friendly downtown with an apparent emphasis on walkable distance between converted apartment buildings and local shopping amenities. Also encouraged is its artistic communities with activities such as public art installations and artists painting in public. However, both communities appeared to have already committed to widespread sprawl at one point and open space was at a premium. Athena concluded that preservation was still possible, but with stronger planning language, use of legal techniques, and resolution.

BSF Consulting



East Brookfield



Brookfield



Brookfield

Land Use Goals

The two small towns of Brookfield and East Brookfield are rural in nature and their land use plans are predictably wary of growth. Despite their relatively small populations, both towns involve their opinions in the plans with community surveys. It is clear that residents are hesitant about the idea of expansion; they enjoy the small town character of their communities and would prefer to remain small and rural. The plans note their abundant open space as reasons to guard against becoming bedroom communities for commuters to Worcester and beyond. Although the fears of suburbanization are real, they may be unfounded as there have been close to no new developments in Brookfield for 50 years. Brookfield also has an admittedly vague land use zoning code without a map. East Brookfield's plan does express some interest in commercial development along its Route 9 corridor and to create a traditional town center for walkable options.

Team Focus

BSF Consulting chose to analyze Brookfield and East Brookfield due to their traditional New England, small-town character and because of their adjacency in the shadow of much larger Worcester. Their interest centered on how each town's land use plan might differentiate when addressing the maintenance of culture and the management of growth. The team decided to explore how the topic of increased economic activity is viewed in the communities given the general lack of commercial development and the associated opportunity costs.

Observations

Immediately noticed by the BSF team during their site visit to Brookfield and East Brookfield was the aging quality of their road and sidewalk infrastructure. In Brookfield, the town less interested in development, an opportunity exists to encourage more small businesses around their traditional town center. Attracting both residents and outside buying power via tourism could preserve the town's character while supporting its tax base and necessary upkeep of its built form. An overhaul to its zoning code could assist such controlled development, using form-based requirements and by-right encouragement. The town center appeared to have good potential for a walkable section that could bring in economic activity. In East Brookfield, despite the lack of a center, Lake Lashaway seems to be its strongest asset. Currently, it is difficult to access due to poor parking availability and an overall sense that it is to be used only by lakefront residents. Here, there is an opportunity for wider usage and perhaps a few small businesses, but the alternative is Route 9. Like in Brookfield, commercial development can significantly increase its revenue and tourism, perhaps resulting in funding possibilities for their desired town center.

JCG Planning, LLC.



Greenfield



Orange



Orange

Land Use Goals

Greenfield and Orange have both adopted a downtown redevelopment model as a method to revitalize their respective communities. Vacant and underutilized downtown properties have been identified as strong assets that may provide a two-fold service to the community. These historic structures have the ability to house diverse commercial uses while simultaneously encouraging infill development that preserves surrounding natural assets. In addition to this concentrated growth, successful downtown districts have the ability to provide new jobs, expand the local tax base, attract outside buying power, and improve the overall quality of life for local residents. Greenfield's land use plan includes goals such as encouraging downtown development of businesses that "fit" and that do not require additional infrastructure, while supporting larger commercial activity elsewhere. It recommends aggressive public acquisition of vacant or underutilized properties for redevelopment. Orange also seems wary of overly dominant businesses as its plan focuses on promoting a diverse mix of businesses that revitalize its downtown and create new jobs. It also acknowledges existing development challenges and the need to respond with better land use planning.

Team Focus

Although Greenfield and Orange identify similar goals in their master planning, the actual downtown environment of each community varies greatly. Greenfield has experienced recent commercial growth and investment while Orange is still seeking more economic stability. These community variations are useful to observe, particularly when considering how and why similar community planning goals can be realized. JCG was aware of this before its decision to focus not only on each town's adherence to its land use plan, but also to note where substantial deviations may be causing one to less successfully realize its development goals than the other.

Observations

The JCG site visits to Greenfield and Orange were met with stark contrasts. Whereas Greenfield's downtown was successfully applying its land use goals, specifically with its Bank Row Urban Renewal program and Arts Block developments, Orange's was mostly vacant. Despite obvious advantages for Greenfield, notably its physical location on I-91 and other major auto routes, it was striking that its downtown independent businesses were co-existing with its large, chain retail stores on the outskirts. One particular entity, WalMart, was absent in Greenfield but it was the only thriving store in Orange, being only one mile from its downtown. Newly expanded in 2013 into a supercenter, it clearly violates Orange's land use goals of encouraging diverse business opportunities that will locate downtown and provide the most number of jobs.

MAC Consulting Group



Pittsfield



Pittsfield



Great Barrington

Land Use Goals

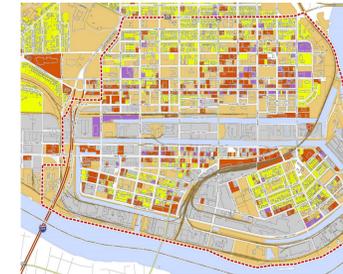
Both Great Barrington and Pittsfield include in their missions the protection and enhancement of their historic village centers while also expanding their economic bases. They also both focus on curbing sprawl to preserve the natural beauty of their rural character that attracts so many visitors to the region every year. However, Great Barrington and Pittsfield are dissimilar in the character of their historical roots and the desired demographic that they are trying to attract. Great Barrington is attempting to sustain their tourist industry while bringing more affordable housing options to the area to create a diverse population. Pittsfield is focused on creating and improving the creative economy in their city through attracting a younger demographic of creative small businesses through mixed-use development in their commercial core. Pittsfield appears to be more focused on creating a livable community in the heart of the Berkshires, whereas Great Barrington has always been a smaller, tourism based economy.

Team Focus

MAC Consulting Group decided to focus on the cities' infill strategies and commercial core development. Great Barrington and Pittsfield are both attempting to create more opportunities for infill to increase density and prevent sprawl. The commercial core of each city has existing infrastructure that is functioning as its intended use. However, in order to achieve its goal as a thriving creative economy, Pittsfield's commercial core needs more diverse uses that include retail, residential, and small creative businesses. Great Barrington's smaller commercial core already has a mixed use of small creative businesses that attract visitors. However, the lack in affordable housing discourages a dense core that supports a diverse mix of people to live downtown: further perpetuating Great Barrington's image as a tourist town.

Observations

One of the apparent signs of Pittsfield's commitment to revitalize its downtown are investments in its "people climate." These include newer educational rain gardens. In addition, the physical infrastructure supports the goal of developing its commercial core with widened sidewalks, easy access to mail postage throughout the downtown, planting of street trees, safe cross walks with safety medians in the middle, and the preservation of historic buildings. However, certain new developments seem to be occurring in the city's periphery, inviting potential sprawl. Although Great Barrington has plenty of vacant space in its downtown ready for infill, its pedestrian infrastructure needs updating and expansion. However, the city has the advantage of heavy tourism support of its somewhat limited commercial base, downtown retail. Its vibrant main corridor is an excellent attribute from which to develop affordable and senior housing in this desirable setting.



Holyoke



Holyoke



South Hadley

Land Use Goals

In 2010, South Hadley commissioned a master plan outlining its ambitions and actions to spur and mediate growth. Most notably, the master plan seeks to address affordable housing and increased density in residential development. The master plan seeks to establish better cohesion between the two commercial districts (116 by Mt. Holyoke College and Main Street in South Hadley Falls). This is complimented by aspirations of spurring economic activity within both these regions. The South Hadley Falls region, along the river, is targeted by a planned open space and recreation overlay district. Holyoke currently is updating its comprehensive master plan. The most important ambition of planning officials is to revitalize the downtown area parallel with the adaptive reuse of properties in the Flats. The catalyst for this activity is transportation, including a new bus terminal and a proposed train station with Amtrak service with the goal of promoting walkability and residential occupation to counter vacancies. Currently, residential units are zoned to include two parking spaces, something that conflicts with Smart Growth strategies. The Planning Department intends to attempt to change this as it is the most noticeable barrier to promoting residential units downtown. To compliment this, the city also plans on promoting more upscale market rate housing aimed at those who will work along the canal districts, notably in the creative economy.

Team Focus

Planalytics chose these two communities because we were interested in looking at the boundary of a suburban and urban environment and their methods for addressing land use issues and future development scenarios. Their historic and geographic relationship has an interesting juxtaposition and proposed an interesting research project.

Observations

When traveling through South Hadley, the lack of connectivity between the three main regions is evident. The industrial region is isolated and more could be done to further economic development. The falls area seemingly lacks private investment, an issue the town hopes to counter with its proposed overlay district. Additionally, South Hadley, like a myriad of towns, is victim to aging infrastructure and vacancies compounded by the most recent recession. But, the Village Commons, located and largely financed by adjacent Mt. Holyoke, is highly successful and generates a good example of compact, walkable development. In Holyoke, mill infrastructure offers the type of live/work space desired by the creative class. The Canal District is exemplary of of this and private investment is increasing. Its neat grid, clean energy from its hydropower, and dense development are clear opportunities for further smart growth achievements. But, poverty is the utmost concern and can hinder greater growth unless addressed.

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