



AN OVERVIEW OF COMPATIBILITY GUIDELINES FOR RETAINING COMMUNITY CHARACTER

An Overview of Community Character Guidelines

This section provides an overview of the advantages to implementing community character guidelines. The purpose of community character guidelines is to articulate acceptable site and architectural design principles, guidelines and standards that promote rural New England Character along Route 3A and Route 102 corridors in Litchfield. Community character guidelines address the negative impacts of development, considering aesthetic character, environmental intrusion, site design, and the relationship to the surrounding community. They also set minimum standards to enhance the overall value and appearance of the community, but are not intended to discourage creative excellence in the design of commercial and industrial projects. It is a means for showing developers exactly how the community expects new growth to appear and function.

Communities throughout the country have adopted community character guidelines to mitigate growth and inhibit sprawl. Some communities have adopted guidelines that are specific to a particular type of development, such as “big-box” shopping centers, while others have enacted voluntary or regulatory standards that cover every type of development.

Community character guidelines are only one tool in a comprehensive planning approach to protect community character, which also includes conservation development, access management, non-regulatory resource protection, and flexible road standards, among others. Another tool is available through the assessment of existing regulations, ordinances and review processes, recommended to identify constraints toward promoting community character, particularly if new growth has not met community expectations. It is assumed that zoning ordinances and regulations ensure that development will occur as articulated in the goals of Master Plans, whereby character shall be preserved. Review of these documents may reveal inconsistencies between the Master Plan and development codes, precluding preservation goals. It may be necessary to amend these documents to accommodate growth in a manner that is compatible with the Town’s character.

Comprehensive review of codes and procedures would identify regulations that are contrary to the goals of the Master Plan, and obstacles to desirable development proposals. Only key development parameters need to be included in the zoning ordinance covering density, floor area ratio, building coverage and setbacks. Everything else should become part of site plan, subdivision or design standards documents to allow for increased flexibility.

Flexibility should also be built into the review process, providing opportunities for innovative approaches that incorporate the most desirable goals of the community, striving for a balance between economic development and the conservation of resources. A comprehensive approach to the review process should evaluate the functional, cultural, aesthetic and environmental consequences of design alternatives. The process should be clear and predictable. Community character Guidelines may be adopted as a stand-alone document to support the regulations, or individual sections might be incorporated directly into the regulations. Community character guidelines may be adopted as a voluntary option, with or without incentives. Incentives may be offered in a number of forms, including increased densities or building size or reduced setbacks, in exchange for conservation easements or public improvements of benefit to the community.



Defining and Maintaining Community Character

The Master Plan defines the most desirable elements of the community's character and articulates goals for preservation of resources. The physical patterns of Litchfield include the historic town center, rural roads, open spaces and vistas, orchards, farms, stonewalls, and woodland edges, all recalling Litchfield's agricultural past. Open spaces that include sensitive land, prime agricultural land, aquifer recharge areas, trails and recreation areas, and spaces that open to scenic or historic views all represent opportunities for preservation. Litchfield should identify features to be preserved prior to development, looking for opportunities to provide linkages through greenways.



Photo 1: Agricultural Heritage

Characteristics of Litchfield's Corridors

Litchfield has two main corridors through town with commercial development potential. Route 102 extends a short stretch through Litchfield where the Town bisects a section of Hudson. Along this stretch are a variety of business uses and a mobile home park, all with one or more curb cuts to the road. Several undeveloped parcels of various sizes still remain. This is an extension of a similar development pattern occurring in this area along Route 102 in Hudson. The proposed construction of the Circumferential Highway, with interchange access to Route 102 in Litchfield, will impact future land use along the corridor.

The Route 3A corridor forms the spine of the community, running parallel with the Merrimack River from the north end of Hudson to the south end of Manchester. Although there are existing pockets of commercial and residential development, the Route 3A corridor can be characterized as a rural road, with agricultural and historical significance. The agricultural heritage of this community is intact along the corridor, with farm fields reaching out to the river, barns and farmhouses, woodlands and wetlands, and historic civic structures grouped around the old town hall.



Photo 2: Merrimack River



Another interchange for the Circumferential Highway is planned for Route 3A near the Hudson boundary. There will be development pressures resulting from opportunities for access to major routes allowed by this interchange, as well as from the future expansion of the Manchester airport to the north. The appearance of the corridor at build-out will largely be determined by the approach the Town takes in guiding the location, density and character of this development.

Development Along Road Corridors

Increased traffic and intensified land use patterns have negatively impacted developing main corridors, both visually and functionally. The visual clutter includes a confusing conglomeration of businesses, parking lots, signs and curb-cuts. The capacity and function of these roads have been diminished due to the proliferation of curb-cuts, decreasing safety and efficiency. Pedestrian or bicycle issues have not been considered in the design of these corridors. The level of service has decreased to failure, requiring further road improvements and the erosion of the existing street edge, which increases the visual degradation of the corridor.

The modern auto-centered culture comprised of strip malls, big-box retail centers and disconnected suburbs have given us a legacy of disposable landscapes, complete with nondescript architecture void of any sense of permanency or relationship to place. This modern landscape, which has been labeled sprawl, is expensive to operate, costly to maintain, and a continued social and ecological threat. Current zoning prescribes this landscape by segregating uses and dictating large lots and excessive setbacks for commercial development. Landscaping is used in inconsistent and ineffective ways to decorate parking lots. There is almost a total absence of shade trees, both along the street as a community character element, and within developed areas to define spaces and ameliorate the negative impacts of paved surfaces.

Litchfield can achieve the preservation of community character along Route 3A in commercial/industrial zones through a variety of methods. Commercial development is currently limited to the northern and southern ends of 3A, which is beneficial for several reasons. The current development pattern provides opportunities to preserve prime agricultural land and associated cultural features between centers of business development at both ends. Current commercial development is near more densely populated areas in the region, including Manchester and Hudson, as well as adjacent to proposed major infrastructure improvements. By directing future business growth to these locations, the benefits of compact development can be realized.

The desire to control sprawl can only be determined by the legislative body of the Town of Litchfield. Discouraging strip development and managing site accessibility will support efforts that encourage compact development on Route 3A and Route 102. Site accessibility can be managed through limiting curb cuts to key intersections and requiring linked parking lots behind structures. It is equally important to provide for pedestrian and bicycle networks, both on and off site. Non-motorized transportation opportunities improve where commercial developments could be linked to residential neighborhoods near both corridors. Quality infill development along Route 102 that maximizes access management could encourage more desirable redevelopment in the future.



The existing roadway corridor should be considered an integral part of a proposed development, with attention given to details enhancing the human experience. In situations where the preservation of agricultural vistas is desirable, the existing vegetation along a corridor may be retained, with the new development tucked into the landscape. In higher density locations where village centered development opportunities exist, the roadway may be directly related to the site by physical and visual connections, including reduced building setbacks along the frontage, street tree patterns, interconnected sidewalks, and architectural details that make buildings attractive from all sides.

Site development guidelines address on-site issues for providing commercial and industrial uses with pedestrian compatible features, such as places to walk safely and comfortably. Guidelines address building location and orientation, parking configurations, landscaping, lighting and sign design.



Photo 3: Pedestrian compatible development.

Site Compatibility Guidelines to Preserve and Enhance Community Character

The site plan should provide for the interrelationship of all site elements and the coordination with adjacent development and natural features. The design process should include consideration of the impacts of the proposal on the Town of Litchfield, the surrounding neighborhood, nearby streets and intersections, and adjacent properties. Buildings and sites should be compatible with their surroundings. Along Route 3A this would require that new development retain the agricultural characteristics of the corridor, preserving views and open space. Compatibility guidelines based on traditional town patterns perpetuate the best characteristics of a community.

Relationship of Project to Surrounding Property:

- Consider site context
- Incorporate compatible transitions – landscaping, natural features
- Maintain physical connections – employ access management
- Protect views through building setbacks, heights, and planting design
- Locate business and institutional buildings at major intersections, closer to roads, with parking in the rear. Parking should minimize pavement, maximize planting, and consider natural drainage



Relationship of Project to Site:

- Provide for smooth transitions between streetscape, entrance, landscape
- Maintain height, massing and scale of proposed structure consistent with existing structures

Relationship of Landscape Design to Project:

- Maintain existing topography, vegetation, water patterns
- Provide transitions between building, parking, pedestrian walkways, disabled access
- Install suitable plant material
- Provide design details to enhance the pedestrian experience

Building Orientation and Siting Guidelines

Building orientation guidelines address the relationships of structures to the street. The best models for establishing guidelines are typically found in the traditional architecture and development patterns of the community. Placement of the building in relation to the surrounding elements is just as important as their design. Historically, building facades were oriented parallel to the street, with shallow setbacks and architectural details related to entries reaching out to the streetscape. By transferring the attention in building design to an outward or public focus, it becomes possible to create places for people, along the street and within parking areas.



Photo 4: Traditional Litchfield architecture.

Diagram Missing

Figure 1: Traditional patterns of development.

Building setbacks can influence the character of the street. Guidelines can provide for appropriate minimum and maximum setbacks. Large scale development could provide for smaller structures away from principle buildings adjacent to the street, and at all street corners to maintain a consistent street edge wall. Multiple structures could be permitted on business and mixed use sites, either as land lease arrangements or as out parcels, with shared parking for the entire development. Shared parking should always be located behind buildings and otherwise screened from view off-site.



Photo 5: Rural setback preserving vegetation.



Photo 6: Interpretation of traditional style.

Building Design Guidelines

Guidelines for building design should be flexible enough to allow contemporary interpretations of traditional styles. Maintaining a traditional scale in commercial structures results in building design that relates to pedestrian scale. Roof shapes, height, building materials, fenestration and doors are key design issues. Building scale relationships must be considered, and appropriate transitions provided where a change of scale is proposed or required. Stepping building height, breaking up the mass of the building and shifting building placement can help mitigate the impact of differing building scales and intensities.

Access Management

Access management is another tool Litchfield can employ to achieve a balance between minimizing site access conflicts and maximizing the mobility of the corridor. Although this tool emphasizes mobility for automobiles, access management provides a number of benefits both on and off site, when used in combination with linked parking lots. Access management limits the number of places vehicles enter and leave a roadway and reduces deceleration and turning movements in travel lanes. The obvious benefits include reduction in accidents, lower travel times, and increased capacity of the roadway. There is a cost benefit to Litchfield by extending the useful life of a current road. Access management even contributes to quality of life by relieving congestion, causing a positive impact on fuel consumption, air quality and travel time saved.

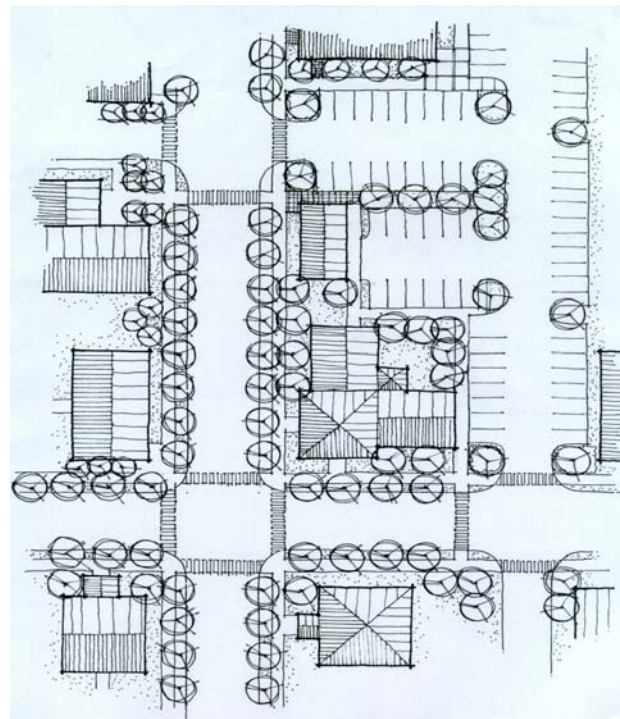


Figure 2: Controlled access & shared parking



Off-street Parking Lot Design

The design of off-street parking areas associated with commercial development has a major impact on the quality of the streetscape. Design guidelines consider the issues of distribution of parking around a building. Rear parking lots become feasible when multiple entries are provided into buildings. Before the automobile's dominance, parking was provided along the street in front of stores, and when necessary, behind buildings where it was out of site. On street parking affords convenient access to shops, and creates a barrier between the pedestrians on the street and vehicular travel lanes. It may not be feasible or practical to require on-street parking along rural corridors, except in village centers, where parked cars also function to calm traffic. It does, however, make sense to tuck the vehicles out of site behind buildings to maintain the integrity of the streetscape, whether it is rural or otherwise. One of the better examples of this principle in Litchfield exists at a professional office on the east side of Route 102, just after crossing the boundary from Hudson.

The concept of shared parking is addressed under access management, however, guidelines for the provision of shared parking should be considered with the design of off-street parking. Shared parking is directly related to providing alleys and rear access connections between adjacent parking lots. A reduction in side and rear setbacks might be allowed to accomplish the goals of minimizing unnecessary paved surfaces. Shared parking cross easement agreements should be required to guarantee the long term success of managing parking across property boundaries.

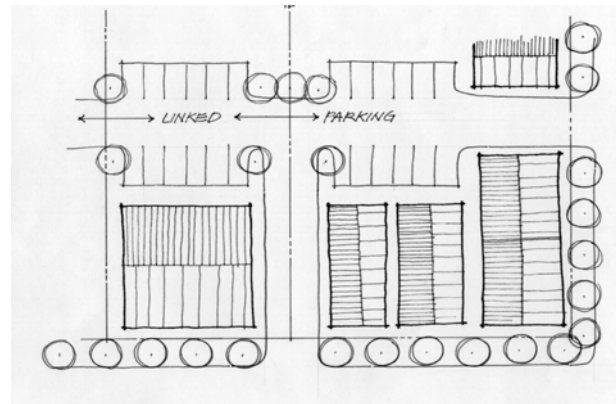


Figure 3: *Parking lots linked.*

Public Spaces: Pedestrian Access and Amenities

Human scaled design must include guidelines for pedestrian access and public amenities. The site plan should clearly express the separation between pedestrian and vehicular traffic. Modeled after traditional village centers or Main Streets, the spaces between parked vehicles and buildings need to provide comfort, safety, visual stimulation, and opportunities to gather. Guidelines can help create a rewarding pedestrian experience in commercial and mixed use environments.

Site Landscaping Guidelines and Standards

Site Landscaping elements provide a number of benefits addressing site context issues, the relationship of buildings to the site, and the amelioration of the parking lot environment. Landscaping can define spaces, buffer objectionable views, and enhance the visual experience of a place. The intent of Landscaping Guidelines is to achieve high quality site appearance, to assure design compatibility, to direct character and form, to conserve water and to enhance the overall value of the community.



Shade trees are the most critical element of a landscape plan, having the greatest impact on shaping and maintaining community character. Landscaping Guidelines incorporate shade trees along road frontages, access drives and in parking lots. Developers are encouraged to provide a comprehensive landscape plan that provides adequate tree cover, as well as, additional landscape elements considering plant hardiness and water conservation. Landscape plans are more than a decorative afterthought. A well designed landscape provides an environment for people and a means to mitigate the negative impacts of development.

Well-executed parking lot landscaping can provide many benefits, including mitigation of the harsh environment produced by expanses of asphalt or gravel. Landscaping can provide space for continuous pedestrian walkways, creating a separation from vehicular travel ways. Stormwater can be mitigated in landscaped medians, reducing the requirements for unsightly detention basins. Well landscaped parking areas, using land forms, vegetation and walls or fences, can effectively buffer a parking lot from any direction off-site.

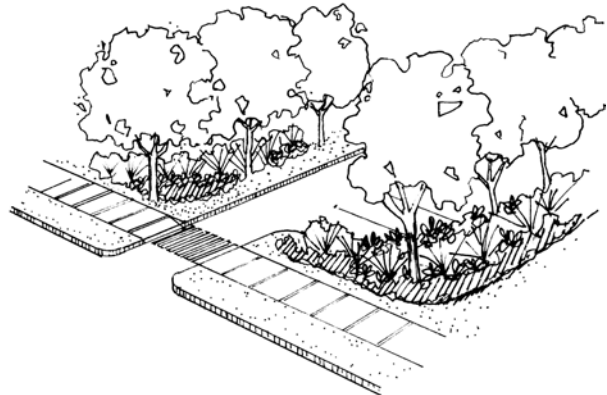


Figure 4: Well landscaped parking areas.

Site Lighting Guidelines

Lighting is a critical design element to be considered when planning for new development. Site lighting extends the use of places beyond daylight hours, which is desirable for most commercial developments. Unfortunately, lighting is very often installed with little consideration for off-site impacts, including light pollution. The height of light poles and fixtures are typically out of scale with the pedestrian environment, with the sole purpose of illuminating the greatest area possible. More often than not, there is too much light overall, or not enough illumination of critical points of conflict, such as driveway curb cuts and pedestrian entrances. Harsh or poor illumination detracts from the desirability of a place. Light poles and fixtures should be considered a design element and relate to the character of the project.

Sign Guidelines

Although most communities have sign ordinances to control the size and location of commercial signs, current regulations may not provide enough guidance to avoid visual clutter. There is a proliferation of corporate images tacked all over sites, on signs, structures, freestanding and even floating. Additional guidelines could incorporate compatibility considerations in addition to size and placement, such as the materials and color, amount and size of information permitted and restrictions on franchise signs.



Diagram Missing

Lowering the height of signs to be seen from under tree canopies and requiring individual shop or office signs to be fixed on structures will further reduce visual clutter. Signs should be required to have external illumination, which allows for signs to be constructed with natural materials and to minimize light pollution.

Figure 5: Ground mounted sign guidelines.

Loading and Service Facilities and Mechanical Equipment

One of the more challenging tasks in site design is controlling the visual impact and pedestrian conflicts with loading and service areas. Guidelines encourage design of these facilities to minimize interference with pedestrian and automobile circulation on the site and to provide adequate space and facilities for the needs of the proposed use. Guidelines also provide for screening of facilities from public rights-of-way, abutting properties, access drives, public spaces and pedestrian walkways.

Uses with Special Considerations

The most challenging site design considerations include accommodating the specific needs of service stations, drive through establishments and outdoor sales. Service stations have evolved into combination convenience markets/gas stations/car wash centers, and the vehicle service use has been relegated to franchise service centers. Other drive-through businesses with similar traffic patterns include banks, fast food restaurants and the newly emerging drive-through pharmacy.

Siting gas pumps for smooth traffic flow, both on and off site, and for the safety and convenience of pedestrians presents a major challenge. Compatibility becomes more elusive when factoring in conventional cinder block and plastic gas station architecture. Architecture and building materials and colors should be compatible with the site, the neighborhood, and the New England environment. Materials and colors should be used to unify the site through a clearly defined palette. Corporate colors or patterns should not be permitted for any structure or site element, other than the sign. Separate structures (canopies, carwash, cashiers booth, etc.) should have consistent architectural detail and design elements to provide a cohesive project site.

Drive through businesses, such as gas station/convenience markets, fast food restaurants, banks, and pharmacies are all high volume traffic generators and should not be permitted at corner lots of intersections. In addition to the more restrictive guidelines for uses with special considerations, drive through development should conform to all other requirements of the Community character Guidelines.



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Businesses with outdoor sales are the most difficult siting challenge of all, because they typically display entire product inventories on the edge of the road, and the structure plays a subordinate role. Outdoor display should not negatively detract from the character of the streetscape. Certain products may even be desirable along the frontage, including farm products and nursery stock. Limiting the permitted location and area of display, as well as, the allowed distances between similar uses, are all tools used by communities to combat visual clutter.

The corner lot remains the most desirable business location, presumably because it has the greatest access potential. Corner lots should also be revered by the community as gateways setting the stage for community character. Development of the corner lot can pose access management challenges that should be addressed in the access management plan. Corner lot development should be restricted to the types of businesses, site layout and inter-site connections permitted. Architecture, trees, landscaping, low walls, and sidewalks should define street corners. Corner lots anchored by the strength of quality architecture and the pattern of street trees makes a strong statement about the character of a community. By contrast, corner lots anchored by service stations and parking lots detract from the quality of that crossroad and diminish the overall character of the community.

Industrial Business and Research Development

Industrial development typically occurs on large parcels, or within business parks, which are separated from all other uses. Light industry has evolved into more compatible uses in recent years, particularly computer and technology based operations, which do not generate noise or pollution. For many light industrial uses, the most objectionable activity is heavy truck traffic. Given the nature of modern industry, opportunities exist to encourage mixed uses providing housing and commercial activities near employment centers.

The best models for new development exist in the traditional patterns of pre-1950's industrial structures. Sidewalks, public spaces, seating areas, trails, recreational facilities, and other amenities should be incorporated into business parks, so that work places provide pedestrian friendly environments to enhance the overall work experience.



Photo 7: Traditional industrial architecture.



For new industrial development, the level of detail applied to the quality of site layout, architecture, landscaping and pedestrian amenities, should be similar to commercial development. The façade of any structure visible from a public street should reflect the character of the community. For any building side not visible from a public street, a more utilitarian structure may be appropriate to the particular use.

Tools for Guiding Business Development

There are any number of methods available for prescribing the patterns of new growth, ranging from allowing development to occur according current codes to the complete replacement of current codes with a comprehensive ensemble of tools for community character preservation. The former results in loss of resources, whereas the latter provides the opportunity to effectively balance growth with quality of life.

Most communities feel protected from the negative impacts of development by their current zoning ordinances and land use regulations. In reality, current land use codes and approval processes can be inefficient, requiring single use zones and excessive development standards, including large lots, wide streets and deep setbacks. The restrictive nature of current zoning adds layers of review to the process. Regulatory barriers and protracted review procedures hinder innovative design. In most communities, traditional patterns of development would not be permitted, requiring applicants to seek variances and waivers, extending the approval time process, which adds to project cost. The Town of Peterborough has recently drafted a new ordinance to allow the continued pattern of its town center, previously precluded by zoning.



Photo 8: Elements of rural character.



Photo 9: Agricultural heritage.

Until it is gone, many people are unaware of the significant value of the rural landscape to their quality of life. At one point in the recent past, Route 101A was a rural highway winding through a peaceful landscape of farms, fields, hilly woodlands and the manmade features of an agricultural heritage. The current Route 101A landscape resulted from codes that support the development of malls and the proliferation of strip centers along highways. It is important for landowners to understand that development without guidance to maintain community character can result in the loss of those values most treasured in their land. Given proposed highway and airport improvements, Route 3A could very likely become the next Route 101A or Daniel Webster Highway, if there are no changes to current land development ordinances and regulations.



The entire community of the Town of Litchfield should determine the course of action for future growth in the corridors, by expanding upon the Community Profile to clarify and confirm the Town's vision. Strategies for future action should result from additional Town participatory brainstorming events involving a wide cross section of residents, with the assistance of technical support to facilitate the process. Prior to these meetings, the Town should request professional analysis of the master plan, ordinances, regulations, review process and any other document or issue influencing development, and resources should be identified and mapped.

Several important products could result from these participatory exercises. Through consensus building, a master plan for development along the corridors could emerge, identifying nodes of development, segments of limited or protected development, controlled access points, resource protection areas, greenways, trails, and pedestrian/bike routes. Recommendations for land use regulation amendments, review process revamping, and proposed community character guidelines may also emanate through this process. The results of this process should be mapped, analyzed, packaged and scheduled for adoption in their appropriate forms.

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