FROM DENSITY TO DESIGN: MAKING COMPACT NEIGHBORHOODS WORK

POP QUIZ: When you hear the word “density,” what are the first images that come to mind? If visions of concrete block apartment buildings and generic vinyl-clad townhouses are what you see, you are not alone. For many Vermonters, “density” and “Vermont” are like oil and water.

But the surprising truth is, many of Vermont’s most beloved neighborhoods are actually just as dense as your average suburban townhouse development. According to data gathered by Smart Growth Vermont in 2008, a typical block in Burlington’s South End averages around four to six homes per acre. The older areas in Bristol and Vergennes – both much smaller communities than Burlington – are nearly as dense, with around three or four homes per acre. Even in Orwell, a small village in Addison County, homes are set close to the street on narrow lots that give the village a remarkably similar feel to neighborhoods in larger communities.

So what is the difference between these great old neighborhoods and the new housing developments that everyone loves to hate? In a word, it is design. Vermont communities have once put together according to a set of principles that helped ensure that even close neighbors could be good neighbors. While some present-day developers have rediscovered (or never forgot) these principles, many have abandoned them. The result is development that just doesn’t feel like Vermont.

Later this year, Smart Growth Vermont will add a major new section to our website on the relationship between density and design.

AGING ISSUE

By Jennifer Wallace-Brodeur, Associate State Director, AARP Vermont

mismatch between communities designed almost exclusively for the automobile and a growing population that does not drive.

Those living in areas where transportation is better integrated with housing make more trips outside their homes, walk more, and use public transportation more than their counterparts elsewhere. Communities that provide a variety of transportation options enable older individuals to retain their independence and stay engaged.

In 2030, a quarter of the Vermont population will be 65 or older, almost double what it is now. As our state continues to develop we need to be more aware of the impacts of our land use choices, not just on the environment and our landscape, but also on the ability of all of us to fully access our communities as we get older.

AARP: GUEST VIEW

LAND USE IS AN AGING ISSUE

By Jennifer Wallace-Brodeur, Associate State Director, AARP Vermont

Hanging up the car keys is one of the most traumatic decisions a person can face in their older years. For many it symbolizes a transition from independence to dependence. In a rural state like Vermont, it can literally mean severing the connection to your community and increased isolation. The question we need to ask ourselves is how much does community design contribute to this all too familiar scenario?

AARP believes community design is critical in determining how well midlife and older Americans are able to move about their neighborhoods and get to their desired destinations. Over half of individuals age 50 and above live in the suburbs, resulting in a mobility
Danville Village has been around for at least two hundred years. But as far as the Town of Danville’s zoning bylaw is concerned, this friendly little village on Route 2 just west of St. Johnsbury barely even exists. As currently written, Danville’s zoning bylaw essentially requires suburban-style development throughout the town – even in the heart of the village.

But village residents want this to change. A survey and a series of focus groups of village residents and business owners conducted in late 2008 revealed strong support for new zoning standards that support compact, pedestrian-friendly development in and around the village. With help from Smart Growth Vermont, the Danville Planning Commission has been hard at work on a series of updates that will help the village become a “full-service” community, with a range of locally oriented shops within easy walking distance of houses and apartments for people in every stage of life.

Smart Growth Vermont’s role has been to help the Planning Commission draft and revise new zoning bylaw language for the Town of Danville that:

- Promotes a vibrant mix of uses in the heart of Danville Village within the compact historic village footprint.
- Protects and enhances the character of the village’s historic residential areas while allowing for compatible infill.
- Creates a new district around the existing village for neighborhood expansion that follows the traditional pattern of small lots on interconnected streets.
- Ensures that development along Route 2 on either side of the village is compatible with and enhances the viability of existing village businesses.

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Using traditional Vermont neighborhoods as a guide, we will explore the subtle, but fundamentally important, principles that make these neighborhoods such great places to live. Some of these principles include:

**Modest homes on smaller lots.** Older neighborhoods are defined by relatively small lots that are much deeper than they are wide, a layout that provides a balance of density (many homes per block) and private space (deep back yards).

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