

## ELEMENT 4: COMMUNITY AND NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING

### OVERVIEW

This Element is being developed in conjunction with the Jefferson County Department of Health's Health Action Plan; and in fact, this very Comprehensive Plan is specifically part of *that* Plan's Strategic Issue #2, "Livable Communities for Community Health" – see Goal 5 below:

- Goal 1 – Improve safety throughout communities
- Goal 2 – Improve environmental quality
- Goal 3 – Increase ways to be physically active in all new developments
- Goal 4 – Preserve and revitalize neighborhoods
- Goal 5 – Work toward a county development plan  
with participation from all cities
- Goal 6 – Support development of a viable and integrated mass  
transportation system

And while it is likely that, as the comprehensive planning program continues, the goals listed above will be separated out into individual Elements in their own right – for more detailed analysis and more specific policy development – the *concepts* represented in these goals are still *quite* applicable within the context of *this* Element. And so it is appropriate – and important – that they be included here, in the *overall* initial plan for our communities and neighborhoods, until a separate discussion can be developed.

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The reason for focusing on development at the community and neighborhood levels stems from the reality that large commercial developments have historically either been annexed into, or were actually developed within, the cities – leaving residential development, institutional uses and only small-scale businesses and offices as the primary concern for the *unincorporated* area of the County.

Thus, additional goals of this Element are to:

- promote the development or re-development of neighborhoods and communities into attractive, desirable and sustainable living environments;
- allow new neighborhoods and communities to be developed with different and unique characteristics in order to offer a broad range of opportunities for developers as well as prospective homeowners; and,
- provide for both horizontal and vertical mixing of (appropriately compatible) uses within communities and neighborhoods that will help reduce the need for local residents to go outside of their communities for "stuff".

And then within those (nine) *goals* will be a series of more specific *objectives* that will be inherent in accomplishing each of those goals – and future editions of this Plan Element

will explore how this Element, and the Comprehensive Plan as a whole, can be used to accomplish objectives such as:

- incorporating health and safety factors into the design of new developments
- providing (or requiring) sidewalks, at least in certain portions of developments
- providing for the adequate lighting in neighborhoods, on main roads, and particularly in public/civic areas
- protect sensitive land areas (such as wetlands, floodplains, steep slopes, etc.) adjacent to as well as within developments
- facilitate development of pedestrian-oriented communities and neighborhoods with opportunities for residents to walk or ride bicycles throughout
- locate schools and other civic facilities, such as parks, playgrounds, community centers and churches so that they are “walkable” from within the community
- revise existing plans, codes and ordinances as described above, and especially with respect to allowing neighborhood-oriented *commercial* uses that are *also* “walkable” from within the community – thus reducing the need for residents to use their cars and/or even leave their community on such a regular basis
- allow citizens, through neighborhood and community groups, to help direct the planning and development their respective neighborhood/community according to *their* “vision” of the future
- provide incentives for retrofitting older neighborhoods according to the objectives of this Element
- encourage the preservation of natural vegetation, over and above any supplemental landscaping, in order to enhance both the attractiveness and the environmental harmony of new developments
- create streetscapes that they are safe to use for pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and bus riders of all ages and abilities
- develop and incorporate transit routes to provide a viable alternative means of travel *between* neighborhoods and communities

And, of course, the one goal that might also be considered an “objective” unto itself is that the County *“prepare a county-wide development plan that encompasses not only the unincorporated area of the county, but includes participation from all of the cities as well”*... because “we’re *all* in this together”, and it will require communication and coordination *across* jurisdictional boundaries in order for the whole County – the biggest “community” of all – to be an attractive place for people to live, work, play *and build*.

Yet this does not mean that every city and town should do things just like the County, or that every jurisdiction should try to look like the next; to the contrary, this Element actively *promotes* differences in character and design from one community – and even one *neighborhood* – to the next. Going back to one of the stated purposes of the Comprehensive Plan itself, it is through the promotion and protection *of* the differences in character from one area to the next that the County and the cities will be able to offer “something for everyone”. However, all of the jurisdictions *do* need to try to *harmonize* with each other where boundaries meet – and we can only do that by working *together* on development-related issues.

## BUILDING SUSTAINABLE NEIGHBORHOODS AND COMMUNITIES

The approach for dealing with new residential, institutional and commercial uses (in the unincorporated area of the County) will be based on a hierarchy of development patterns of progressively increasing intensity, and how well a new use or development fits into the established or projected pattern of the area in which it is being proposed.

Established development patterns include the scattered residential and agricultural uses that are characteristic of the rural areas of the County; areas where residential subdivisions virtually dominate the land; and a few areas where commercial development has self-defined a central core, crossroads or corridor over the years – where the addition of “like” uses has historically been found to be appropriate.

However, one of the primary purposes of this Plan is to project *new* development patterns – i.e., where the existing pattern is going to change or “evolve”, whether due to an anticipated expansion of infrastructure, or simply because it lies in the “path of development”. The Comprehensive Plan, therefore – particularly in considering proposals to establish new commercial uses where none presently exist – applies a framework of different “community types” in order to direct this rural-to-urban evolution such that it occurs in a proper and orderly manner.

For demonstration purposes, this evolutionary process can conceptually be thought of as starting within the scattered development pattern of a rural area, where the initial clustering of new development around a centralized location is referred to as a “hamlet”. Over time and with additional development, the hamlet would develop into a larger and/or higher-density neighborhood called a “village”. With continued development, however, that neighborhood would actually evolve into a community – which would eventually be expected to encompass multiple neighborhoods – called an “urban village”. And finally, there is a “town” designation that would contain several neighborhoods and/or communities.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, both types of neighborhoods – hamlets and villages – are to be centered around a neighborhood-oriented commercial and/or civic node, which may be little more than a crossroads, particularly in the case of a hamlet. That commercial/civic node will be a little more intense in a village setting, and will become even more significant at the urban village and town levels – where the presence of *multiple* neighborhoods will, by their very nature, give the community smaller satellite commercial nodes *in addition to* the main “downtown” core at the center. *But the main point is to facilitate the development of neighborhoods and communities around local-oriented businesses and service establishments such that these developments can become at least somewhat self-sufficient, and so that their residents do not need to leave and go outside the neighborhood or community as often.*

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<sup>1</sup> See Section 1c, “General Implementation of the Comprehensive Plan”, for detailed information on the four community types.

Another perspective on this kind of development is to see it as ‘an approach to land use planning and urban design that promotes the building of neighborhoods with a mix of uses and housing types, architectural variety, a central public gathering place, interconnecting streets and alleys, and edges defined by greenbelts and boulevards; and where the basic goal is the integration of the activities of potential residents with work, shopping, recreation and transit all within walking distance’. This approach to development has also been called ‘the process of reintegrating the components of modern life – housing, workplace, shopping, and recreation – into compact, pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use neighborhoods linked by transit and set in a larger regional open-space framework’.

And while not *all* of the aspects mentioned above are necessarily “on the horizon” for developments in Jefferson County at this particular time – such as transit availability outside the urban, incorporated core of the County – programs undertaken by jurisdictions in other parts of the country have shown that the *principles* that define this “new urbanism” or “neotraditional planning” *can* be applied successfully to infill and redevelopment sites *within* urbanized areas just as well as they can be to *new* development sites on the *periphery*. And *that* is the impetus behind this Element of the Comprehensive Plan.

## NON-RESIDENTIAL USES IN VILLAGES

This is also a good point to stop and discuss what *Jefferson County’s* Comprehensive Plan will consider to *be* an appropriate “mixing” of land uses in the neighborhoods and communities this Element will be seeking to build.

As has already been stated in other Sections of this Plan,<sup>2</sup> every non-residential use proposed to be located at a designated “village” site will be closely evaluated with regard to its relationship to the (existing and future) surrounding community. Not only must these uses be compatible in **scope** and **scale** with the surrounding residential development, but these uses – particularly *commercial* businesses – should rely primarily on the *residents* living *in* that village and its immediately surrounding area for the *majority* of their business. Large (“big box”) commercial retailers, and commercial ventures whose nature is to ‘*draw in*’ the majority of their customers from more distant locations – i.e., from *outside* the community – should be located in the larger “regional” retail centers, malls, shopping centers, etc., which will carry designation as a “Special District” on the watershed development plan map; and which are generally located where a constant flow of “non-local” traffic is better accommodated (by the infrastructure) without the imposition of unnecessary adverse impacts on residential development. Thus, *these* types of businesses would *not* fit in this village concept.

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<sup>2</sup> See Sections 1b (The Planning Process), 1c (General Implementation of the Comprehensive Plan), and 2a (Overview of the Plan).

## Fitting Into The ‘Village Profile’

Proposed rezonings for new commercial uses, as well as new residential developments, will be evaluated according to how they fit within the context of a village or hamlet, including:

- A street layout with a central intersection at the designated commercial/civic (i.e., village) center;
- Pedestrian-friendly orientation with sidewalks connecting residential and commercial/civic areas;
- An appropriate mix and arrangement of residential uses, with an overall residential density that will support the commercial uses;
- The commercial uses are primarily oriented to serving the residents of that village/neighborhood.

Another indicator of whether or not a particular business would be appropriate in a village setting is the **frequency of repeat customers** – which is often related to the type, size and/or expense of the items being sold, or the service being rendered. Thus, a business that could reasonably be expected to be patronized by the same people *at least* two or three times a month (if not two or three times a *week* or more), would be more appropriate for a village than a business whose customers would be expected to visit once or twice a *year* (or less). Along those same lines, Blacksburg, Virginia defines a “neighborhood retail establishment” as an establishment primarily engaged in the provision of frequently or recurrently needed goods for household consumption, such as prepackaged food and beverages, and limited household supplies and hardware.

And this repeat patronage is not only an indicator of how well a business would “fit in” with the surrounding community – in the sense of being **a desirable and attractive addition to the local neighborhood** – but it would *also* likely be an indicator as to the viability of the business *itself* at *that* particular location.

But in determining whether or not a particular business is acceptable within the village concept of the Comprehensive Plan, it must *also* be assessed in terms of its “**disruption potential**” – i.e., activities that would detract from the residents’ safe and peaceful enjoyment of the their neighborhood’s living environment. Thus, non-residential operations and facilities should not *only* be in keeping with the *character* of the neighborhood, but they should not be *disruptive* in terms of such things as the generation of dust, noise, light or traffic in excess of that otherwise normal to such neighborhood.

Finally, **design** – whether architectural or overall site design – should also be considered in the evaluation of whether or not a particular business or facility would be in keeping with the character of a particular neighborhood, and this includes keeping the overall **size** of the commercial *area* (as a whole) for a given village proportionately

appropriate to the uses within the community. Nevertheless, in the final analysis, these commercial areas – *and* the individual businesses and facilities contained therein – should be envisioned as **providing limited retail goods and services primarily for nearby residential customers.**

And of course, there are a number of neighborhoods and communities *like* this that are *already* established all across the County; and it will *also* be the case that some “proposed” hamlets and villages will not evolve as described earlier. But since the Plan is a “dynamic” document, and subject – in fact, *expected* – to change over time, it can simply be amended (through the usual public hearing process) to reflect the fact that a particular village or hamlet did *not* come about. And even then, there will still always be a variety of living and business environments that Jefferson County will be able to offer to prospective residents and developers alike.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, included among the goals and objectives listed earlier are a number of things that will be considered ‘stepping stones’ toward to the accomplishment of those goals. For example, in order to provide for the practical and effective mixing of different uses within a neighborhood, there will need to be some changes made to the zoning regulations that have historically sought to *separate* the different kinds of uses from one another; and there will likely need to be changes made to the subdivision regulations as well, in order to truly promote physical activity in new developments. Thus, this Element will also recommend adoption of an alternative way of handling zoning, subdivision and related development requirements in order to allow developers to do “something different”.

## PREVIEW OF A NEW DISTRICT

As described in detail Section 1b (The Planning Process), the County developed this Plan by adapting the principles set forth in a document called the SmartCode to our situation here in Jefferson County. And it was also stated that this SmartCode is more than *just* a “code” – it’s not just a glorified zoning ordinance or something like that – it is a complete planning and development program that has been used across the country, and even in several communities here in Alabama.

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<sup>3</sup> The other types of uses the County will continue to face – such as industrial developments and “specialized” facilities like landfills, mining, and so on – are typically located with some means of separation from residential areas anyway, and will continue to be treated that way. These uses also generally carry standard requirements and/or restrictions that are generated as much by the specific industries themselves as by the local governing authority; and so the placement and regulation of these kinds of developments are covered in another Element of this Comprehensive Plan. Suffice it to say that the Plan will direct these developments such that there will be minimal, if any, impact on existing and projected (future) communities and neighborhoods.



**"The SmartCode is an integrated land development ordinance. It folds planning, zoning, subdivision regulations, urban design, public works standards and basic architectural controls into one compact document. It is also a unified ordinance, spanning scales from the region to the community to the building."**

*And it speaks directly to properly mixing different uses within a community, and establishing alternative design standards, all in order to reduce the need – and tendency – for people to use their cars.*

Yet the SmartCode's authors did not intend for it just to be taken and used "off the shelf"; they *designed* it to be used as a *template* for local jurisdictions to take and customize to fit *their own* particular needs and unique characteristics. And so, included in this Element of the Plan is the recommendation that we develop a customized SmartCode of our own, *specifically for Jefferson County, Alabama...*

But now, one thing about trying to do this in *most* of Jefferson County is that there will probably be very few opportunities for someone to develop an 80-, 90- or 100-acre village – or even to be able to get hold of a single 40-acre parcel that someone could develop into even a little hamlet as a single, consolidated project. Instead, as stated in Section 1c (Implementation of the Plan), the County will still be operating on a property-by-property basis *most* of the time, as individuals buy and sell properties, and come in for rezoning and subdivision approvals. And so most of these new communities are essentially going to have to evolve over time, *and* will have to do so through the "standard" zoning, subdivision and construction regulations in place *at the time*. But there will *still* be a plan *for* those villages – developed and adopted by the Planning & Zoning Commission, and incorporated *into* the future development plan map *for* that watershed<sup>4</sup> – that will be used to guide their evolution such that their development/re-development takes place in a logical, orderly and appropriate manner (in spite of the

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<sup>4</sup> See Section 1c, "General Implementation of the Comprehensive Plan", for the procedure for preparing and adopting the more-detailed village sub-plans.

fact that it will generally happen “a parcel at a time”, and will be done with conventional zoning districts).

*On the other hand*, for the people that *do* come upon larger-sized tracts of land that *can* be developed as a single – albeit, long-term – project; or who are able to *consolidate* a number of smaller parcels so as to essentially “create” a sizeable development opportunity; *it is the intent of the County to be able to offer an alternative to developing under the conventional standards and requirements of its existing zoning, subdivision and construction regulations.*

In fact, there are already several large-scale developments like this that are already underway in and around this watershed – though not in unincorporated Jefferson County. And with more and more landowners and developers across the country looking for this kind of opportunity, adding this kind of development option to Jefferson County’s regulatory framework will accommodate that market for large-scale, mixed-use developments in “our” area – the unincorporated County.

Thus, Jefferson County will be looking at developing *its own* customized version of the SmartCode (as stated above), and adopting it into the zoning ordinance as a “floating” overlay zoning district – which simply means that if a developer “qualifies” for it, he or she will have the option of developing in accordance with a very detailed and well-defined development plan that *they* will submit for approval by the Planning & Zoning Commission; all affected County departments; and by the County Commission itself – essentially the same way the current rezoning process works.

Only, in the case of this *new* district – dubbed the “SmartCode Floating Overlay District” – the approved development plan will go *far beyond* what developers in the County have been able to do with the traditional ‘PUD plans’ they’ve been doing for years: this new type of plan will essentially establish new zoning, subdivision and design standards, *irrespective* of whatever the actual underlying zoning of the property may be.

Among other things, the new SmartCode District will allow for the mixing of appropriately compatible uses; it will permit higher densities in exchange for preserved open spaces and public/civic areas; and it will relax a number of design standards currently imposed by the County’s zoning, subdivision and construction regulations – *upon review and approval by the pertinent County departments* – in order to give the developer maximum flexibility for creating a new and unique character for his or her development.

## SmartCode Floating Overlay District

- **Will SUPPORT** walkable and mixed-use neighborhoods, transportation options, conservation of open lands, local character, a variety of housing types, and vibrant commercial and civic centers.
- **Will DISCOURAGE** sprawl development, automobile dependency, loss of open lands, monotonous subdivisions, deserted commercial properties, and unsafe streets and parks.

### Specific connections to the Comprehensive Plan goals:

- Allows the mixing of appropriately compatible uses *within* a neighborhood.
- Permits higher densities in exchange for open space and public/civic areas, preservation of sensitive lands, etc.
- Relaxed setbacks and similar requirements will increase design options and reduce infrastructure costs.
- Proposals are submitted in the form of a detailed development plan to be approved by P&Z, the County Commission and all affected departments.

But again, it will be strictly optional – simply an *alternative* approach that will be *available* to anyone who might be interested in doing something different than what the rigid design requirements and standard limitations of the County’s “regular” zoning districts will allow. Nevertheless, those standard zoning districts will *always* be there for anyone who would prefer to simply keep doing things the way they have always done them in the past...