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The Secrets of Successful Communities

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The following article was published on PlannersWeb.com on July 29, 2013, and is reprinted here with McMahon's permission. It is ShoreLine's hope that Eastern Shore leaders will give careful consideration to McMahon's ideas, take them to heart and incorporate them in Eastern Shore comprehensive plans and zoning ordinances.

- **There are over 25,000 incorporated communities in America. How many of these are truly successful?**
- **How is it that some small towns and rust belt cities are prospering, while many others are suffering disinvestment, loss of identity, and even abandonment?**
- **Why are some communities able to maintain their historic character and quality of life in the face of a rapidly changing world, while others have lost the very features that once gave them distinction and appeal?**
- **How can communities, both big and small, grow without losing their heart and soul?**

From coast to coast, communities are struggling to answer these questions. After working in hundreds of communities in all regions of the country, I have come to some conclusions about why some communities succeed and others fail. There are many communities that have found ways to retain their small town values, historic character, scenic beauty and sense of community, yet sustain a prosperous economy. And they've done it without accepting the kind of cookie-cutter development that has turned many communities into faceless places that young people flee, tourists avoid and which no longer instill a sense of pride in residents.

Every "successful" community has its own strengths and weaknesses, but they all share some common characteristics. It's clear for instance that successful communities involve a broad cross-section of residents in determining and planning the future. They also capitalize on their distinctive assets – their architecture, history, natural surroundings, and home grown businesses – rather than trying to adopt a new and different identity.

Most successful communities also utilize a variety of private-sector and market incentives to influence their development, instead of relying solely on government regulations. Not every successful community displays all of the following characteristics, but most have made use of at least three or four:

1. **Have a vision for the future.**
2. **Inventory community assets.**
3. **Use education and incentives, not just regulation.**
4. **Pick and choose among development projects.**
5. **Cooperate with neighbors for mutual benefit.**
6. **Pay attention to community aesthetics.**
7. **Have strong leaders and committed citizens.**

Have a Vision for the Future

Successful communities always have a plan for the future. Unfortunately, "planning" is a dirty word in some communities, especially in small towns and rural areas. In some places, this is the result of today's highly polarized political culture. In other places, it results from a misunderstanding of planning and its value.

The truth is, failing to plan simply means planning to fail. It is difficult to name any successful individual, organization, corporation or community that doesn't plan for the future.

Try to imagine a company that didn't have a business plan. It would have a very hard time attracting investors or staying competitive in the marketplace. The same is true of communities. A community plan is simply a blueprint for the future. People may differ on how to achieve the community's vision, but without a blueprint, a community will flounder.

Understandably, people in small towns don't like change. But change is inevitable. Technology, the economy, demographics, population growth, market trends and consumer attitudes are always changing, and they will affect a community whether people like it or not. There are really only two kinds of change in the world today: planned change and unplanned change.

Communities can grow by choice or chance. Abraham Lincoln used to say that "the best way to predict the future is to create it yourself." Communities with a vision for the future will always be more successful than communities that just accept whatever comes along.

Inventory Community Assets

Creating a vision for the future begins by inventorying a community's assets: natural, architectural, human, educational, economic, and so on.

Twenty-first century economic development focuses on what a community has, rather than what it doesn't have. Too many cities and towns spend all their time and money on business recruitment. They build an industrial park out by the airport and then they try like crazy to attract a plant, factory or distribution center to move there. The few communities that are "successful" at this strategy usually accomplish it by giving away the store.

The old economic development paradigm was about cheap land, cheap gas and cheap labor. It was about shotgun recruitment and low cost positioning. In the old economy, the most important infrastructure investment was roads. Today, successful economic development is about laser recruitment and high value positioning. Today highly trained talent is more important than cheap labor and investing in education is far more valuable than widening the highway.

American communities are littered with projects that were sold as a "silver bullet" solution to a city's economic woes: the New Jersey State Aquarium in Camden, New Jersey; Vision Land Amusement Park in Birmingham, Alabama; the Galleria Mall in Worcester, Massachusetts; the Winter Garden in Niagara Falls, New York – to name just a few.

Too many communities think that economic revival is about the one big thing. Whether it is a convention center, a casino, a festival marketplace, a sports arena, or an aquarium, city after city has followed the copycat logic of competition. If your city has a big convention center, my city needs an even bigger one. Festival marketplaces worked fine in cities like Boston and Baltimore, but similar projects went bankrupt in Toledo, Richmond, and a dozen other communities [including Norfolk].

Successful economic development is rarely about the one big thing. More likely, it is about lots of little things working synergistically together in a plan that makes sense. In her award-winning book – *The Living City* – author Roberta Brandes Gratz says that "successful cities think small in a big way."

Two examples of this are Silver Spring, Maryland and Cleveland, Ohio. Cleveland had an aging, undersized convention center. Civic boosters argued for a huge new convention center that could compete with much bigger cities like Chicago, Atlanta, or Minneapolis. But small cities like Cleveland will never win in an arms race to build the biggest convention center. Instead Cleveland took a look at its assets, one of which is the Cleveland Clinic – a world renowned medical center located a short distance from downtown. Instead of trying to compete with every other convention city, Cleveland decided to build a smaller, less expensive meeting facility – the Cleveland Medical Mart and Global Center for Health Innovation – focused on medical conventions and which would have an attached medical mart affiliated with the Cleveland Clinic.

Another example of asset-based economic development is Silver Spring, Maryland. For many years, Silver Spring was

among the largest suburban commercial centers in the Mid-Atlantic region. But, by the early 1990's, Silver Spring had fallen on hard times. In 1996, a story in the *Economist* said "You can see America wilting in downtown Silver Spring. Old office blocks stand empty. A grand art deco theater is frequented only by ghosts. Glitzy department stores have decamped to out-of-town shopping malls. Tattoo parlors, pawnbrokers and discounters remain."

To combat this decline, local officials and an out-of-town developer proposed to build a second Mall of America (like the one in Bloomington, Minnesota). The proposed mega-mall would have 800 stores and it would cover 27 acres. The projected cost was \$800 million and it would require a \$200 million public subsidy. It would also mean the demolition of most of downtown Silver Spring's existing buildings.

So what happened? The county rejected the massive American Dream Mall and set their sights on a succession of more modest developments. First, they realized that despite its decline, Silver Spring had some important assets that were probably more valuable than a giant mega-mall. First, Silver Spring was adjacent to Washington, DC, the nation's capital. Second, it was served by transit (i.e. the Washington Metro system), and third, it was surrounded by stable middle-class neighborhoods.

Rather than spending \$200 million subsidizing a giant mall, county and state officials collaborated to find a site for the new headquarters for the Discovery Communications Corp, which was then housed in several different locations around the Washington area.

The site where Discovery Communications decided to build their new headquarters was adjacent to the Silver Spring Metro Station. Bringing 1500 employees to downtown Silver Spring was a huge boost to the community, but what really synergized the renewal was Discovery Corp's agreement not to build a cafeteria in their new headquarters building. This meant employees would have to patronize local restaurants.

Use Education and Incentives – not just Regulation

Successful communities use education, incentives, partnerships, and voluntary initiatives – not just regulation. To be sure, land use regulations and ordinances are essential to protecting public health and to setting minimum standards of conduct in a community.

Regulations prevent the worst in development, but they rarely bring out the best. Regulations are also subject to shifting political winds. Often one county commission or town council will enact tough regulations only to see them repealed or weakened by a future town council or commission with a different ideology or viewpoint.

If regulations aren't the entire answer, how can a community encourage new development that is in harmony with local aspirations and values?

Communities need to use carrots, not just sticks. They also need to use education, partnerships, and voluntary initiatives. Successful communities have identified a variety of creative ways to influence the development process outside of the regu-

Even small rural communities can cooperate for mutual benefit. Small towns in Mississippi have worked together to organize and promote U.S. Route 61 as “the Blues Highway.” Similarly, five rural counties on Maryland’s Eastern Shore collaborated with the Eastern Shore [MD] Land Conservancy to create a regional agreement to preserve farmland and open space.

Pay Attention to Community Aesthetics.

During the development boom of the 1980’s, *Time Magazine* had a cover story article about what they called “America’s growing slow-growth movement.” The article began with a quote from a civic activist in Southern California, who said “we were in favor of progress, until we saw what it looked like.” Looks count! Aesthetics matter!

Mark Twain put it this way, “We take stock of a city like we take stock of a man. The clothes or appearance are the externals by which we judge.”

Over 80 percent of everything ever built in America has been built since about 1950 and a lot of what we have built is just plain ugly. There are still many beautiful places in America, but to get to these places we must often drive through mile after mile of billboards, strip malls, junk yards, used car lots, fry pits, and endless clutter that has been termed “the geography of nowhere.”

The problem is not development *per se*; rather the problem is the patterns of development. Successful communities pay attention to where they put development, how it is arranged, and what it looks like.

The image of a community is fundamentally important to its economic well-being. Every single day in America people make decisions about where to live, where to invest, where to vacation and where to retire based on what communities look like. Consider tourism, for example. The more any community in America comes to look just like every other community the less reason there is to visit. On the other hand, the more a community does to protect and enhance its uniqueness whether natural or architectural, the more people will want to visit. Tourism is about visiting places that are different, unusual, and unique. If everyplace was just like everyplace else, there would be no reason to go anyplace.

Successful communities pay attention to aesthetics. Typically they control signs, they plant street trees, they protect scenic views and historic buildings, and they encourage new construction that fits in with the existing community.

Have Strong Leaders and Committed Citizens

Successful communities have strong leaders and committed citizens. A small number of committed people can make a big difference in a community. Sometime these people are longtime residents upset with how unmanaged growth has changed what they love about their hometown. Others times, the leaders might be newcomers who want to make sure that their adopted hometown doesn’t develop the same ugliness or congestion as the one they left. More often than not, they’re simply citizens who care a great deal about their community.



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An example of a citizen who made a big difference is Jerry Adelman. Jerry grew up in the small town of Lockport, Illinois. Almost single-handedly Jerry created the Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor which helped restore an abandoned canal linking Lockport with Chicago. Adelman’s success at building local support for the canal convinced Congress to add the canal corridor to the national park system.

What about the Naysayers? Every community has naysayers. Whatever the civic or community leaders propose to do, some people will always say things like: “you can’t do it,” “it won’t work,” “it costs too much,” “we tried that already.” And, “no” is a very powerful word in a small community, but leaders of successful communities know that “yes” is a more powerful word. Yes, we can make this town a better place to live in, to look at, to work in, to visit. A pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity. An optimist sees opportunity in every difficulty.

Summing Up. We live in a rapidly changing world. In his new book, *The Great Reset*, author Richard Florida says that “the post-recession economy is reshaping the way we live, work, shop and move around.” He goes on to predict that “communities that embrace the future will prosper. Those that do not will decline.”

One big change is that people and businesses can now choose where to live or operate a business. In today’s world, communities that cannot differentiate themselves will have no competitive advantage. This means that quality of life is more important than ever.

Successful communities know that sameness is not a plus. It is minus. Successful communities set themselves apart. They know that communities that choose their future are always more successful than those that leave their future to chance.

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latory process. Some of the incentives they use include: conservation easements; purchase of development rights; expedited permit review; tax abatements that promote the rehabilitation of historic buildings; award and recognition programs; density bonuses for saving open space; and other techniques.

In Staunton, Virginia, the Historic Staunton Foundation offered free design assistance to any downtown business owner who would restore the façade of their building. They did this after the city council had rejected a measure to create an historic district in downtown Staunton. At first, only one business owner took advantage of the incentive, but then a second business owner restored his building facade, and then a third, and then many more. Today, there are five historic districts in Staunton including the entire downtown, but it all began with an incentive.

Successful communities also use education to encourage voluntary action by citizens. Why do cities and towns need to use education? Because education reduces the need for regulation. Also, because people and businesses will not embrace what they don't understand. Finally, community education is important because, citizens have a right to choose the future, but they need to know what the choices are.

Pick and Choose Among Development Projects

All development is not created equal. Some development projects will make a community a better place to live, work, and visit. Other development projects will not.

The biggest impediment to better development in many communities is a fear of saying "no" to anything. In my experience, communities that will not say no to anything will get the worst of everything.

The proof is everywhere – communities that set low standards or no standards will compete to the bottom. On the other hand, communities that set high standards will compete to the top. This is because they know that if they say no to bad development they will always get better development in its place.

Too many elected officials have an "it'll do" attitude toward new development. Worse yet, they'll accept anything that comes down the pike, even if the proposed project is completely at odds with the community's well thought out vision for the future. They are simply afraid to place any demands on a developer for fear that the developer will walk away if the community asks for too much. This is especially true when dealing with out of town developers or with national chain stores and franchises.

The bottom line for most developers, especially chain stores and franchises, is securing access to profitable trade areas. They evaluate locations based on their economic potential. If they are asked to address local design, historic preservation, site planning or architectural concerns they will usually do so. Bob Gibbs, one of America's leading development consultants says that "when a chain store developer comes to town they generally have three designs (A, B, or C) ranging from "Anywhere, USA" to Unique (sensitive to local character). Which one gets built depends heavily upon how much push back the company gets from local residents and officials about design and its importance."



Consider the McDonald's design we're all familiar with. Most would agree that Asheville, NC, did better with its McDonald's.

One community that has asked chain stores and franchises to fit-in is Davidson, North Carolina. Chain drugstores, like CVS, Rite Aid, and Walgreens are proliferating across the country. They like to build featureless, single-story buildings on downtown corners, usually surrounded by parking — often after one or more historic buildings have been demolished. This is what CVS proposed in Davidson.

The town could have easily accepted the cookie cutter design (Plan A), but instead it insisted on a two story brick building, pulled to the corner with parking in the rear. CVS protested, but at the end of the day they built what the town wanted because they recognized the economic value of being in a profitable location.

The lesson learned is that successful communities have high expectations. They know that community identity is more important than corporate design policy.

Cooperate With Neighbors for Mutual Benefit

Historically, elected officials have tended to view neighboring communities, the county government, and even the managers of adjacent national parks or other public lands as adversaries rather than allies. Some community leaders see economic development as a "zero-sum" game: if you win, I lose.

Successful communities know that today's world requires cooperation for mutual benefit. They know that the real competition today is between regions. They also understand that very few small towns have the resources, by themselves, to attract tourists or to compete with larger communities.

Regional cooperation does not mean giving up your autonomy. It simply recognizes that problems like air pollution, water pollution, traffic congestion and loss of green space do not respect jurisdictional boundaries. Regional problems require regional solutions.

There are numerous examples of communities working together for mutual benefit. In the Denver region, 41 communities cooperated to support funding for a regional transit system (i.e. FasTracks). Cleveland area communities cooperated to build a Metro parks system. Metro Minneapolis and St. Paul collaborate on tax base sharing.