

— Community —
Heart & Soul™

RESOURCE



For Heart & Soul Process Phase



Enhancing Local Character



ORTON FAMILY
FOUNDATION



ORTON FAMILY
FOUNDATION

Mission

The Orton Family Foundation seeks to empower people to shape the future of their communities by improving local decision-making, creating a shared sense of belonging, and ultimately strengthening the social, cultural, and economic vibrancy of each place.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ORTON FAMILY FOUNDATION

The Orton Family Foundation is a small family operating foundation that invests in practices that enhance the ability of citizens to participate in local decision making. Our initiative, Community Heart & Soul™: Guided by What Matters Most, is a new approach to community planning and development designed to help people in small cities and towns navigate change in a way that honors their connection to community and upholds the unique character of each place.

The Foundation wishes to thank the many individuals, local elected and appointed officials, community volunteers, and likeminded practitioners, non-profits, foundations and trade organizations that have contributed in countless ways to our development of the Community Heart & Soul approach.

A special thank you to the residents, volunteers, and leaders in our nine Community Heart & Soul Towns who learned with us—on the ground—to evolve the Heart & Soul method presented in this Field Guide. We could not possibly have done it without all of you, a community of inventive, determined people.

Finally, deep gratitude to Lyman Orton—founder, board chair, and funder of the Orton Family Foundation—for his generosity, passion, and patience. Community Heart & Soul would be a dream, not a growing reality, without his persistent belief in the regular folks who live and work in America's small towns.

Learn more about Heart & Soul at orton.org/heart-soul

Copyright © 2014 Orton Family Foundation | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#)

All rights reserved
Orton Family Foundation

orton.org

A community with Heart & Soul™ enhances local character.

What does it mean?

The local character of a community is about how a community or neighborhood looks and feels. A single building can have its own character, but a community's character is the composition of many buildings, streets, parks, plazas, trees, gardens, views—essentially anything in the built or natural environments. Community character can be orderly and dignified, it could be exuberant and creative, it can be some of both, and

it can vary from one part of town to another. It can be anchored by an architectural style such as Boomtown facades or Victorian houses, or it can be anchored by a feature in the landscape such as a river or a mountain view. Character is usually the first thing that visitors notice in a community, and one of the first things that residents of that community will embrace.

What does this matter?

The character of a community can inspire civic pride as well as economic vitality. Character distinguishes one community from another and promotes a sense of place among residents. Communities with lots of character have curb appeal—they attract visitors and tourists, they attract new residents, and consequently

they attract and support certain businesses. A community that requires new development to contribute to local character also attracts investment: people are more willing to buy or improve a home or a building, or start a business, when they can trust that the whole neighborhood will contribute to that curb appeal.

What can a community do?

New growth and development can impact community character. A number of tools can be used to manage change and encourage development that 'fits in'. It is important that communities make an effort to understand the ingredients of local character—is it about the buildings, the landscapes, the streets, or all of these? Which things are most important? Zoning and subdivision regulations are powerful tools that can steer development in the right or wrong direction depending on how they are crafted.

Design review is a common tool for enforcing specific development criteria—they can promote specific building styles or protect important views or landscapes. Specific ordinances can also regulate items such as the location of communications towers or the size and style of road-side signs. Other actions are less regulatory, such as volunteer gardening programs, tree planting, and downtown beautification projects.

Setting goals and taking action

Below are potential actions that can support a community's values around community character. They are organized within six broad goals. This guide provides a review of each action.

Links to examples and additional resources are also provided.



website

pdf

book

GOALS

ACTIONS

Understand the character of the community

- Conduct a historic resources survey
- Develop a visual resources inventory
- Capture local values through community mapping

Maintain important landscapes

- Protect rural landscapes with conservation subdivisions
- Protect rural landscapes with overlay districts
- Develop a farmland/working lands protection strategy
- Control the visual impact of communication towers and other utilities

Reinforce the character of existing neighborhoods

- Create heritage or character overlay districts
- Adopt a tree protection bylaw
- Enact view protection bylaws

Enhance commercial districts and public places

- Spruce up Main Street
- Require commercial buildings to contribute to character
- Start a garden volunteer program
- Coordinate a cleanup day

Build great neighborhoods

- Plan at the neighborhood scale
- Encourage Traditional Neighborhood Development
- Require houses to face the street
- Build streets for people

Make a good first impression

- Control the visual impact of roadside signs
- Coordinate highway development with a corridor management plan
- Define the entrance to town

Goal Understand the character of the community

Conduct a historic resources survey

Historic buildings and places contribute to the identity and character of a community. There are Federal designations for Historic Landmarks and Places, and typically there is a state inventory and register. A historic resources survey contributes to the development of a

local register, which can be used to justify special actions or regulations for these properties such as design guidelines, development review procedures, or public acquisition.

Example

 [Maine Historic Preservation Commission—Survey program overview](#)

Develop a visual resources inventory

This inventory is a broad survey of character assets that goes beyond historic places. A visual resources inventory documents important physical and visual assets such as: scenic views; landmarks; highly valued landscapes; distinguishing natural features such as rivers, ridgelines and hillsides; scenic roads; gateway roads; architectural

styles; and development patterns. It can also identify opportunities to enhance character and areas where character is deficient or threatened. An inventory that documents and prioritizes these assets is critical to strategic policy development and often provides a reference for any relevant legal challenges.

Example

 [Protecting local scenic resources—Friends of Mid-Coast Maine](#)

Capture local values through community mapping

Community mapping is a participatory approach to identifying community assets, including character assets. Residents and stakeholders are invited to brainstorm and locate (on a map) the places in the community that they think contribute to the character of the

area. Ideas can be prioritized through discussion or in a follow-up survey. Mapping exercises can be open-ended or designed to identify specific features such as scenic resources, neighborhood character, key amenities and services, or landscape features or special places.

Examples

 [PolicyLink—Community mapping](#)

 [Making Community Connections](#)

 [Manteo sacred site mapping](#)




Goal Maintain important landscapes

Protect rural landscapes with conservation subdivisions

Conservation subdivisions are a type of land use bylaw that is used to preserve rural open spaces and working landscapes. New subdivisions are required to cluster new building lots on a small portion of large rural sites in order to minimize their visual impacts, their impact on the landscape, or their impact on productive farm or forest lands. Minimum lots sizes are greatly reduced in order to permit this. The number of new units allowed is the same as the number of units that would be allowed through a conventional subdivision, so the

resulting density is effectively the same (some areas refer to this strategy as density averaging). Development sites are typically located away from such assets as prime agricultural soils, high quality habitat areas, older forests, or scenic views. Performance standards written into the code language should refer to these landscape characteristics, and set measurable thresholds such as the percent of land that should be dedicated to conserved open space.

Examples



-  [Conservation subdivision design review—Smart Communities Network](#)
-  [Conservation design overview and case studies—Center for Land Use Education](#)
-  [Rhode Island conservation subdivision manual](#)

Protect rural landscapes with overlay districts

These are established to protect landscape resources such as: scenic views, specific character landscapes such as meadows or older forests; or certain geographic areas that are highly sensitive to visual impacts such as hill-sides or ridgelines. Overlay districts can include entire towns or extremely specific areas, such as the view-cone between a viewing point and a distant mountain, or the hedgerows and meadows that characterize the road-sides along a scenic route. Design standards introduced

by the overlay district can restrict any construction in sensitive areas, they can establish buffer zones to prevent tree cutting or soil removal, or they could recommend for example that buildings be located at the edge of a field rather than the center. Overlay districts are often complementary to conservation subdivision bylaws—properties that are restricted by an overlay district may be allowed to cluster buildings on smaller lots in an unrestricted area.

Examples

-  [Steep slopes conservation overlay district—Newbury, New Hampshire](#)
-  [Skyline/hillside conservation overlay district—Newbury, New Hampshire](#)

Develop a farmland/working lands protection strategy

(This action introduces broader strategies around the protection of working landscapes that will be subject of a separate report.) Among many other benefits, working landscapes in the rural areas of a town establish broad impressions of community character. Beyond overlay districts and conservation subdivisions, communities can limit development with tools such as:

large lot zoning, agricultural protection zoning, urban growth boundaries, tax abatement or actual-use assessments for working farms, land trust acquisitions or conservation/farm covenants, transfer of development rights (TDRs), and economic development support for local farm and forest products.

Example

 [Maine Farmland Trust](#)

Control the visual impact of communication towers and other utilities.

Communications towers and other utilities such as wind towers can provide lease revenue to a town, but they also can easily impact a highly valued view of a ridgeline or local peak. An ordinance can be established that spells out the design requirements and review procedures for permitting a utility tower. Federal and State laws may preempt local regulations depending on

the type of tower, but local policies may still provide direction by determining objectives and procedures for identifying locations, introducing sunset clauses with conditions for permit/lease renewal, or prioritize stealth facilities by streamlining the approval process. Stealth facilities refers to those that are camouflaged as flagpoles, trees, or church steeples.

Example

 [Regulatory options for communications towers \(specific to Colorado\)](#)

Goal Reinforce the Character of Existing Neighborhoods

Create heritage or character overlay districts

Heritage or character districts are a common way to assert control over the design and character of new development. These districts typically replace or append existing zoning by introducing design standards and a design review step to the permitting process, which

is administered by a design review committee. Design guidelines might specify building details such as roof pitch and roof style, exterior finishes and colors, and landscaping.

Examples

 [Gardnerville, North Carolina character district design guidelines](#)

 [Historical preservation overlay district—Barrington, Illinois](#)



 [Overlay district examples for design flexibility, historic preservation, high rise, hillside, streamside—Colorado Springs, Colorado](#)

Adopt a tree protection bylaw

Trees can be an important part of community character—in neighborhoods and along boulevards, or in parks and along public paths. Trees provide shelter from the weather, define the edges of streets and parks, create a sense of enclosure along a street, and introduce consistency or unity in an area that might have none otherwise. Tree protection bylaws, including trees on private property, can be established to control tree

removal and require replacement plantings. Tree protection bylaws can also protect property owners from view-suits. View-suits are when neighbors sue each other, demanding that they cut down trees in order to create a view, claiming that the view-blocking canopy impacts their property values. Successful lawsuits can result in court-ordered tree clearing of private property.

Examples

-  conservationtools.org—Tree ordinance overview
-  [Tree preservation ordinances—Newton, Massachusetts](#)

Enact view protection bylaws

View protection bylaws can be introduced as an overlay district. These identify important views from public places in town, usually of in-town landmarks such as a historic building or of distant landmarks such as a mountain peak. Design guidelines identify the line of sight between viewpoint and view subject, and recommend building setbacks or height restrictions in order

to maintain the view. The design review process may require before and after photo simulations to clarify how a proposed development will impact the view. In some cases, these limits to development can be offset by relaxing other restrictions, such as parking space requirements, lot line setbacks, or building height limits.

Example

-  [Seattle's Space Needle view protection report](#)



Goal Enhance commercial districts and public places

Spruce up Main Street

Sometimes character on Main Street can be missing. Sprucing up Main Street can include low cost beautification programs or more intensive redevelopment activities. Beautification programs typically include public art, banners, new lampposts, façade improvements,

tree plantings, or new gardens. Redevelopment projects can focus on repurposing a vacant lot or building, or they can focus on rebuilding the streets and sidewalks to make them more pedestrian friendly and include special design treatments.

Examples

-  [Maine downtown center resource library—Maine Development Foundation](#)
-  [“Downtown Sit-Down” Main Street beautification project—Ames, Iowa](#)

Require commercial buildings to contribute to character

New developments in commercial areas, including the downtown or the highway strip, can either contribute to or diminish community character. An overlay district can control this impact by requiring certain site planning and design standards and adding a design review step to the permitting process. Typical design standards in downtowns refer to awnings over building entrances, size and spacing of windows, shallow building set-

backs, façade materials and patterns, paint colors, and architectural treatments (cornices, dentils, moldings). Design standards for highway commercial areas typically require such things as landscaping to break up big expanses of pavement, articulation of storefronts, screening of parking lots, placing buildings closer to the street, and using classy roadside signs (rather than tacky, brightly lit, and enormous ones).

Examples

-  [Excerpts from *Envisioning Better Communities* by Randall Arendt](#)
-  [Main Street design guidelines—Vineland, New Jersey](#)
-  [Downtown design guidelines—Ocean City, Maryland](#)
-  [greatstreets.org—Elements of design](#)
-  [Planned commercial district design standard—Bennington, Vermont](#)

Start a garden volunteer program

Many public areas, such as street corners, small parks or park edges, can be transformed into lush gardens that add much appeal to any community. Since building and maintaining gardens is not typically in the town budget,

many towns invest in developing a volunteer gardening club and small budget for purchasing plants, with club members adopting a garden and maintaining it.

Examples

-  [Green Street Gardeners—Vancouver, British Columbia](#)
-  [Adopt-A-Spot beautification program—Columbia, Missouri](#)

Coordinate a cleanup day

Community character can be adversely affected by the appearance of neglect. Cleanup days can help remedy that neglect by actually fixing things up and by inspiring community spirit. A cleanup day might focus on street cleaning, repairing or painting the playground or

town park gazebo, or helping homeowners or merchants repaint their buildings. Cleanup days can be coordinated by a local chamber of commerce, neighborhood association or town staff.

Example

-  [Green Up Day program—Vermont](#)

Goal Build great neighborhoods

Plan at the neighborhood scale

Neighborhood plans help residents focus on the scale that matters most to them: their neighborhood. Developing a plan at this local level helps create a shared vision and a common understanding of what matters most in that area, and allows stakeholders to better un-

derstand how character is enhanced or realized through land use policies. The plan can be non-regulatory, but as a record of public input and deliberation it can help direct the development of zoning or design guidelines for the area.

Examples

 [Super neighborhood plan workbook— Abilene TX](#)

 [Downtown neighborhood concept plan—Squamish, British Columbia](#)

Encourage Traditional Neighborhood Development

Traditional Neighborhood Development (TND) promotes neighborhood design based on historic patterns of development: deep and narrow building lots with 30 to 50 foot frontages (including commercial districts); minimal front and side setbacks; no driveways, but back-of-lot garages access by lanes; a grid network of streets (rather than collectors with cul de sacs); short blocks (200 to 600 feet between intersections); small

turning radii at intersections and similar traffic calming strategies; and tree-lined streets that include sidewalks. These parameters describe the historic character areas of many towns in North America and can be implemented as public works standards (for streets), as development regulations for new subdivisions, and as small-lot infill standards for existing neighborhoods.

Examples

 [conservationtools.org TND overview](#)

 [TND overview and links—Municipal Research and Services Center of Washington](#)

 [TND overview and examples—Town Paper](#)



 [Traditional Neighborhood Design factsheet](#)

Require houses to present a friendly face to the street

House fronts—or frontages—are an essential contributor to neighborhood character. They are, after all, what you see as you walk down the street. Houses that ‘face the street’ are houses that have their front doors and windows visible to the street, and have a porch or other active living spaces (kitchens, living rooms) facing the street. Houses that don’t face the street tend to have less active and more featureless parts of the building on the streetside, such as garages or carports.

Friendly faces can be encouraged through Form Based Codes, a regulatory alternative to zoning, which typically include frontage requirements such as ‘Porch & Fence’ or ‘Shopfront & Awning’ standards. Regular zoning options can also encourage friendly frontages by requiring garages or parking areas to be set back further than the main house, and by allowing front porches to extend into the front setback.

Examples





-  [City of Greenville, South Carolina, Zoning ordinances to discourage 'Snout Houses' \(pp.4-5\)](#)
-  [Design Guidelines for Neighborhood Commercial and Multi-Family Districts—City of Pasadena, California \(p.14-23, 34-40\)](#)

Build streets for people

Tree-lined streets that are populated with walkers, joggers, and baby strollers are a huge character amenity in a community. Unfortunately, street design is often driven by state or federal programs which can demand cheaper, faster, wider roads for vehicles instead of

safe, slow, and comfortable streets for strollers, wheelchairs, and bikes. 'Complete streets' and 'road diets' are emerging concepts that describe how streets should be designed for all types of transportation.

Examples

-  [National Complete Streets Coalition resources](#)
-  [US Dept. of Transportation policy statement on bike and pedestrian accommodation](#)
-  [Great Streets—Elements of Design](#)
-  [Complete Streets design guidelines—Tennessee Dept. of Transportation](#)

Goal Make a good first impression

Control the visual impact of roadside signs

Creative, over-the-top signs can be the defining characteristic of a town, they can be just more clutter along the road, or they can reinforce the 'Anywhere USA' feeling of a commercial strip. A sign ordinance can be established for an entire community or for specific

areas that controls the size, colors, and placement of signs. Good sign regulations can be developed that strike a balance between commercial marketing needs and community preferences.

Example





-  [conservationtools.org—Sign ordinances overview](#)

Coordinate highway development with a corridor management plan

A corridor management plan focuses on the design and development of a specific roadway and can address different character needs. These plans typically precede other actions listed in this bulletin, such as the creation of design overlay districts, view protection and

sign ordinances, or the creation of a gateway feature. Corridor management plans can be an effective way to work with neighboring jurisdictions along the highway commercial strip.

Examples

-  [Scenic America byways and corridor management plans](#)
 -  [The California Scenic Highway Program](#)
 -  [Major streets and scenic routes—Pima County, Arizona. \(MAP\)](#)
 -  [Major streets and scenic routes—Pima County, Arizona. \(CODE\)](#)
-

Define the entrance to town

The point of arrival, or gateway, into town can establish or reflect community character. Gateway features typically include a “Welcome to...” sign, but otherwise there are no standards. Off the shelf welcome signs don’t contribute much to character—instead find a local artist or hold a design competition. Also, ignore the town line and find a spot where it feels like you are actually arriving in town, such as where the road crests

a hill, wraps around the foot of a mountain, or passes through a stand of old trees. Finally, gateways in more urban areas may be defined by a change in building form or design—such as a sudden change in height, a building that squeezes in towards the street, or a pair of matching buildings that flank the street. These are often encouraged by designating a gateway district with design overlay standards.

Examples

-  [Town gateway images](#)
 -  [Gateway District design standards—Murfreesboro, Tennessee](#)
-

Learn More

-  [Examples of Form Based Code Ordinances—EPA Smart Growth Program](#)
-  [Strategies for Promoting Good Community Design—Scenic America](#)
-  [Design Review Resources—Municipal Research and Services Center of Washington](#)
-  [Community Design Resources—Local Government Commission](#)
-  [Preservation through Bylaws and Ordinances Tools and Techniques for Preservation Used by Communities in Massachusetts](#)
-  [Scenic View Protection Resources—Municipal Research and Services Center of Washington](#)

