

**SUSTAIN SOUTHERN MAINE
WELLS TRANSPORTATION AND CIVIC CENTERS
LESSONS LEARNED**

April 15, 2013

Realities and Assets in a Decentralized Town Center Environment:

1. Moderate to low density areas with multiple disconnected town centers face developmental challenges:

- **Lack of a center focal point:** While some of the amenities of a town center may be in place, **the separation of centers contributes to a lack of town identity.** There are few places for by-chance social interaction among residents, and day-to-day goods and services are either unavailable or scattered far apart from each other. Most businesses, spread out on major roadways, appear to be aimed at pass-through traffic rather than local residents.
- **Poor interconnections for all modes:** Limited connections between different parts of town make it hard for residents to get to the various amenities that are available to them. Because there are only a few roads, traffic is consolidated, which leads to congestion. Because these are typically older, narrow roads that were designed primarily for vehicles delivering goods, and later used for touring, conditions are not pedestrian or bike friendly. **The separation of amenities results in long travel times for nearly any trip.** Poor pedestrian connections force people to use their car between every stop they make, even in those few instances where amenities are fairly close.
- **Too many choices:** A large area with dispersed amenities **does not present a clear choice in terms of where to focus growth.** This means that there are many possible solutions, making it more challenging for a community to coalesce around a single plan.

2. But these kind of communities have assets that present opportunities for future development:

- **A variety of civic amenities:** A community without a town center does have **amenities to build on**, including schools, municipal offices, and businesses. These consistently draw people to these areas from surrounding towns and neighborhoods, as well as those that live near the center.
- **Developable land:** Such a community has a **lot of open land available** for infill development. This land also provides a great opportunity for creating pathways or roads to connect amenities and adding residential development in a manner that can support the growth of adjacent small business. Additional land is often available around the periphery of the area, suitable for less dense residential development that would still be close to and support the core amenities.

Place in Hierarchy of Centers

3. Thinking about the growth potential of an existing district requires understanding its place in the hierarchy of centers: does it have the draw (from largest market area to smallest) of a regional, community, neighborhood, or convenience center? The Wells pilot area is very large and contains within it multiple convenience centers along Route 1. It is also immediately adjacent to employment centers, such as the industrial park off Route 9.
4. Once its place in the natural hierarchy of centers is identified, it is possible to look at ways that the center can fulfill its potential. **The current lack of one multi-use center at the core of Wells, combined with the recent growth of the town provides a powerful opportunity to create a successful center over the next decades.** Strategically placing infill residential development and small businesses, and creating better connections throughout the area will lead to the development over time of a town center, supported by market incentives, town planning and community support.

Capacity for Growth

5. A review of development potential suggests that the Wells study area has the capacity to absorb 25-50% of Well's total projected residential housing growth over the next 25-35 years or some 560-1164 units. In addition, 50-75% of job growth projections for all of Wells could generate 600-900 jobs in this area. Depending on the mix of retail, food service and office space, this could translate to between 300,000 s.f. and 450,000 s.f. of commercial space.
6. The capacity for growth of a location such as the Wells study area depends partly on the amount of buildable, vacant and underdeveloped land in the area. A decentralized town center has a lot of undeveloped land, both interspersed between existing developed parcels and on the periphery.
 - Interior parcels or parcels with frontage on low traffic roads **can be developed as residential with some land left as green space.** These parcels can easily accept the projected growth.
 - The transportation center area can support a combination of small business and potential smaller scale rental housing for those who commute to locations along the Downeaster line.
 - Parcels with road frontage that have good visibility and are near residential uses can be developed as retail or mixed use with office or residential space. **These can be encouraged to develop in a concentrated area so as to attract the maximum number of customers needing multiple services.**
 - The remaining job growth can be absorbed in larger office or light industrial developments on peripheral parcels with good road and/or rail access. **Keeping these**

jobs accessible to a growing town center will support the growth of the center and the attractiveness of these job sites to new employers.

Where to Start

7. Create and improve interconnections

- **Improved road connectivity can reduce congestion on busy arterials** and create new mixed use development opportunities as well as bike and pedestrian connections. In Wells, continuing College Drive through to the intersection of Mile Road and Route 1 would open up new land for development and also reduce traffic in a currently dangerous intersection.
- **Off road bike and pedestrian connections are equally important.** They can be used to provide safe and direct routes connecting schools and other civic properties to residential neighborhoods and retail services. In Wells opportunity exists for a multiuse path connecting York County Community College to the civic core as well as for formalizing a path from Route 1 through the series of municipally owned parcels that make up the civic core.
- **Add bike and pedestrian amenities to existing roads.** Making sure that roads have safe sidewalks and crosswalks can also help enhance the sense of community in a neighborhood by encouraging walking and biking, which in turn leads to opportunities to socialize.

8. Create or support the growth of a village center

- **Creating a village center can give a place a sense of identity** and build community among residents. There are two major types of centers that are traditional for New England towns. They are not mutually exclusive and a combination of both can be very useful.
 1. **Commercial/mixed use center:** Such a center is typified by a dense, walkable but road-oriented downtown. New buildings would be set close to the road but allow for wide sidewalks and include parking away from the road. This will slow traffic and create a safer, less auto-oriented environment. At the same time, it will make the village center visually distinct from adjacent areas of the road. **This type of center, while serving nearby residents and workers, would also draw in passersby** and people from farther flung neighborhoods and communities to shop and use services because of the broad variety of services and goods available. It also sets the stage to host a gathering place, whether municipally sponsored or a business venture. Such a center can include residential housing, perhaps on the second floor or behind storefronts. In Wells, the corner of Rte. 109 and Rte. 1 could be a good location for this type of center, especially if the space vacated by the Fire Station opens up municipally owned space where the town could specify appropriate use and form for private investment by a developer.

2. **Open space/community center:** This center builds on the traditional town green concept by providing landscaped parkland or recreation area at the heart of a more densely populated center of town. It provides a space for local residents to enjoy the outdoors and interact with each other as well as being a venue for town events. **This type of center can be located off major roads as long as it is in walking distance of as many residents as possible.** Wells' existing civic core on Rte. 109 provides a great opportunity to support something of this nature over time, linking the civic core and future residential development along Chapel Road and a new community center via multi-use paths and strategically located local streets.

9. **Identify what types of development are desirable in what parts of town and zone accordingly**

- Decentralized town centers cover large areas. This provides opportunities for development in many places and in order to make sure that portions of the town are not working at cross purposes; **plans should be outlined ahead of time so residents and developers can see the big picture.**
- It is unlikely that a town center, even one spread out over a large area, can support multiple village centers and commercial/mixed use areas. Determining the best location for these, both in the public eye and in terms of economic viability, and then zoning and providing incentives appropriately is an important step in seeing it occur. **An approach that focuses and prioritizes growth areas is most fiscally sustainable and likely to support the goals of building identity, community support and economic vitality.**
- Similarly, identifying areas that the town does not feel are suitable for intensive development and working with property owners to conserve this land is important for keeping the rural character of a small town.

10. **Use transit to connect areas that are farther apart**

- Public transit is a valuable tool for connecting areas of a town that are too far away to walk. In the example of Wells, the beach and the train station are both far away from the town center and even farther from each other. Transit can help people get between these areas, particularly visitors and those who may not be able to drive. In the town of Wells, an existing seasonal transit service provides a model to build from in order to create a more robust, year round service.