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Business-Oriented Neighborhoods: Their Time Has Come

By Douglas Porter, FAICP

"Thou shalt mix uses" is a constant refrain in the growing pile of literature on smart growth.

But how that should be done still needs to be spelled out. What we have now is two models: the developer's model of massive business parks and regional shopping centers (Tyson's Corner) and the boutique-oriented service centers that characterize many new urbanist developments.

In this piece, I propose a different model of a business center, one with significant residential and civic components, one that makes it possible for suburbanites to live within walking distance of where they work.

There are already some good examples of this kind of mix: New town centers in Southlake near Dallas, Phillips Place in Charlotte, CityPlace in West Palm Beach, and the Bethesda Row and Pentagon Row developments in the Washington, D.C., area represent inspired infill projects that are reaping the economic benefits of upscale suburban surroundings.

Elsewhere too, things are changing, in part in response to pressure from advocates of new urbanism and smart growth. Developers of large-scale business and retail projects, both existing and new, are adjusting to new demands for specific development products and welcoming opportunities to open up new markets. And they are responding to some communities' willingness and even eagerness to support a wider range of uses and encourage non-car travel to, from, and within projects. In short, they are moving in the direction of forming what could be called business-oriented neighborhoods.

Proven and profitable

There's no doubt that single-use development has its advantages. Office park tenants gain status from their well-designed surroundings, and they enjoy the convenience of nearby support services. An added benefit is being able to capture the full attention of employees in a relatively distraction-free workplace.

Developers of regional shopping malls and big box centers also see high value in their products. Their premise — borne out by experience — is that patrons will drive long distances to find the largest array of products and product prices available within one complex or building. Strip shopping centers feed off the streams of traffic, supplementing the variety of goods and services available in large centers. Regardless of the traffic tie-ups often engendered by clusters of retail complexes, customers flock to them regularly.

Developers know how to build these types of projects, public officials have honed regulatory tools for guiding their location and design, and most people find them convenient and familiar places to work and shop. For local governments, the result is often a significant fiscal dividend.

Not so smart

From the smart growth vantage point, the view is less rosy. Such large-scale, single-use projects represent a flagrantly un-smart form of development. Smart growth calls for varied uses, but these complexes generally sport dozens and frequently hundreds of acres of similar uses.

The smart growth goal of walkability is thwarted by designs for expansive office parks and shopping complexes that cater to drivers first and walkers last. Smart growth's emphasis on connectivity is undercut by the virtual walling off of such projects from surrounding neighborhoods (often at the request of neighbors). Frequently, they offer only one or two access points, which are often choked during peak travel hours.

Is there a smarter way to provide the services and employment offered by such complexes? Is there a design approach that would introduce more uses and more walkable and welcoming public spaces, and that would integrate the complex with the urban fabric around it?

We are just starting to see some project designs that reach toward those goals, motivated by changing market circumstances. Good sites for new regional shopping centers are becoming rare or expensive, leading many developers to reconfigure existing centers or underused sites to create multi-use town centers and add-on entertainment complexes.

To my surprise, new urbanists have not played a major role in this movement. The new urbanists view neighborhoods as centers of community life, equipped not only with a variety of housing types but also a sprinkling of shops, workplaces, public buildings and spaces, and cultural and religious institutions. And in communities across the nation, developers are building projects that reflect these ideas.

However, the new urbanists have focused little attention on alternative designs for large-scale business and retail complexes. In Peter Katz's 1994 book, *The New Urbanism*, Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk specifically rejected the "rigorously single-activity zones of suburbia" such as office parks and shopping centers. But they offered no alternative model.

Seven years later, Peter Calthorpe, in *The Regional City*, proposed a hierarchy of village, town, and urban centers that function as the social and economic focus and primary destination for clusters of neighborhoods. Centers have a variety of uses that are "primarily retail, civic, and workplace dominated with some residential uses mixed in." But the book does not discuss how new centers might evolve over time and existing centers might be retrofitted to become town centers.

Even more promising is this: In *From Greyfields to Goldfields*, published in 2002 by the Congress for the New Urbanism, author Lee Sobel advocates redevelopment of poorly performing shopping malls to create multi-use centers outfitted with public spaces and streets. Despite difficulties in overcoming weak markets and divided ownerships, Sobel sees revitalized centers as turning inefficient, single-purpose uses into multi-use complexes that can help rescue neighborhoods from decline.

Small steps

Recent articles in national publications have highlighted a trend toward "shopping villages," in which housing is added to retail malls and strip centers. One example, highlighted in *Planning* last April, is Santana Row in San Jose, California, which includes 100 shops and 1,200 residential units. However, with goods, services, and living spaces priced for the Gucci crowd and lacking civic spaces, schools, and community centers, such developments have a decidedly narrow market appeal.

A more middle-of-the-road example, albeit small in scale, is a residential addition behind the Congressional Plaza shopping center along Rockville Pike in Montgomery County, Maryland. Here, a 143-unit apartment building located on two acres of former surface parking is wrapped around a new garage that accommodates parking for residents and replaces the lost commercial parking. The apartments look out on townhouses and apartments already lining the street at the rear of the shopping center property.

The development took advantage of the virtually free site and retained the shopping center's visibility from the highway. Neal Payton, an architect with Torti Gallas & Partners in Silver Spring, designers of the project, observes

that such developments, while undramatic, can add up to substantial increases in density and mix of uses.

Office mix

Office parks in many communities have been hard hit by the downturn in office space demand (caused in part by the trend of outsourcing jobs to foreign countries). As a result, office park developers are willing to consider alternatives.

National examples include two in Texas: Legacy in Plano and Addison Circle in Addison. Both of these these projects emphasize office development but include significant residential components. In Legacy, 2,500 units are planned for the town center, and Addison Circle will eventually have about 4,300 units next to a sizable office park. Legacy boasts a rail transit station, and both projects include attractive civic and open spaces.

In Colorado, the redevelopment of Lowry Air Force Base and Stapleton Airport in Denver offer hope for business-oriented neighborhoods. Both of these public-private projects exhibit a daring mix of uses, including a high percentage of residential development, that places many residents within a half-mile of employment and shopping.

As another example, development over time of substantial office space around the Pleasant Hill transit station, part of San Francisco's BART system, is being matched by new residential and retail development that could be termed a transit- and business-oriented neighborhood.

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Most developers are still leery about the obstacles that lie ahead for such projects: the timidity of financial backers, strong demands for standard products, site and design difficulties, and NIMBY opposition.

Local planners who wish to promote the development of business-oriented neighborhoods can play a critical role in making them happen. Enabling a mix of uses through planning and zoning designations is an important step, especially if the zoning allows multiple uses by right. Some communities have adopted zoning districts that require a certain proportion of uses and that may require a certain amount of one type of development to be completed before moving on to a subsequent phase. Such regulations provide a road map for developing multi-use projects.

Planners can also support business-oriented neighborhoods by establishing a framework for future development. Looking beyond one-shot project deals

and building on existing uses, they can collaborate with property owners and neighborhood interests to provide guidelines, incentives, and infrastructure plans for an integrated mix of uses. Bethesda, Maryland, is an example of a business-oriented neighborhood that has evolved in this way

Bethesda, which is on the Washington area's Metro line, is also an example of the power of proximity to transit. Planners involved in supporting transit-oriented development should seize the opportunity to create business-oriented neighborhoods to strengthen the local economy.

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Images: A small-scale example: The Congressional Plaza shopping center in Rockville, Maryland. Its 143 apartments are next to a retail center and half a mile from a transit station. Photo by Jeffery Sauers.