

APPENDIX C

Recommendations for “Downtown” areas
from the
Shopping Centers and Downtowns – Suffolk County, New York,
prepared by Suffolk County Department of Planning,
dated May 2006

The downtown is the core of the community, and it reflects the community's identity and character. This unique role is sometimes absent in suburbia. Our downtowns are still strong and viable parts of the local communities they serve. While some downtowns have attracted new chain retailers and boutique shops, most downtowns now contain a significantly higher proportion of non-retail uses than in the past. Downtowns should focus on their strengths, such as architectural and local heritage, reasonable rents in some cases, close proximity to nearby residences, and access to sewers in some cases. The downtown business district's role as center of commerce and community can be further strengthened in several ways.

It is suggested that the following recommendations be implemented regarding downtowns in Suffolk County:

- *Encourage the development or redevelopment of higher density housing in and adjacent to downtown areas.*
- *Sewage capacity extensions or expansions should be pursued in downtown areas that desire additional development.*
- *Encourage in-fill commercial development to fill large gaps between buildings in downtowns.*
- *Street-level storefronts in downtowns should have a significant amount of glass frontage to help create a more positive downtown shopping experience.*
- *Municipalities should acquire key parcels near downtown areas for parking and green spaces and should coordinate parking within downtowns.*
- *Encourage destination uses to locate in downtown areas.*
- *Downtown business districts should investigate the possibility of forming business improvement districts (BIDs).*
- *Public restroom facilities should be provided in large downtowns.*

Recommendation 1: Encourage the development or redevelopment of higher density housing in and adjacent to downtown areas, comparable with local conditions.

A stable, healthy housing stock surrounding a downtown is important to maintain the vitality of the downtown area. When housing is added in or near the downtown area, the economy of the downtown is strengthened by the additional business generated by the additional residents. Local towns and villages should encourage the construction of appropriately scaled renter or owner-occupied multi-family housing near downtown centers. Many downtowns are the ideal location for multi-unit senior citizen housing, because of proximity to shopping, services and transportation.

New housing construction in downtown areas may involve redevelopment. In certain cases, adjacent lots could be assembled to allow for more well-planned residential or mixed-uses. The Town of Riverhead recently approved the concept of redeveloping a large portion of its downtown district to include new buildings with mixed commercial/residential uses, parking, and a waterfront esplanade. These changes are part of a larger plan for the improvement and redevelopment of the entire downtown Riverhead area. The Village of Patchogue has announced plans to assemble multiple parcels and redevelop the land for an 80 unit owner-occupied affordable housing complex within walking distance of the downtown. Other downtown areas with such development or redevelopment opportunities include Bay Shore, Copiague, Wyandanch, Brentwood, Ronkonkoma, Huntington Station, East Northport, Kings Park, Smithtown and Port Jefferson Station.

In some communities, the existing zoning code should be modified to encourage mixed-use development: retail uses on the first floor and apartment units above. Some existing single-tenant or multi-tenant buildings in downtown areas are suitable for a second story addition. Apartment units (or office uses) above ground floor retail space strengthen the customer base for downtown merchants. To encourage mixed-use development in the downtown, towns and villages may want to create Downtown Development Districts in their zoning codes, with provisions for development bonuses in specific cases. The Town of Islip has created such a district.

Recommendation 2: Sewage capacity extensions or expansions should be pursued in downtown areas that desire additional development but where sewage capacity is a constraint.

Downtown areas that are suitable for additional commercial development including medical offices and restaurants, higher density housing or second story uses are often constrained by the lack of sewage capacity. New development or redevelopment proposals are often hindered by sanitary code density restrictions. Downtown areas that might benefit from sewage line extensions include Huntington Station, Wyandanch, Smithtown, East Patchogue and Westhampton Beach.

As an alternative to the development or extension of sewage treatment systems, municipalities can also consider the development of sub-regional wastewater disposal plans. Such plans essentially use a transfer of development rights from nearby open space (if it exists) to offset higher density uses in the downtown area.

Recommendation 3: Encourage in-fill commercial development to fill large gaps between buildings in downtowns.

Large gaps between buildings in a downtown discourage pedestrians from venturing beyond those gaps. Prudent in-fill commercial development will help create a positive experience of continuous street-level shopping. Any new development in downtown areas should have building lines roughly aligned with existing buildings to give the appearance of a continuous compact downtown area, yet new buildings should maintain a sufficiently wide sidewalk to allow for easy pedestrian flow. In this way, a more cohesive, more well-defined downtown district will result.

A mixed-use building has been proposed for a vacant lot in the center of downtown Copiague, which will fill a significant gap there with ground floor retail. Other downtown areas could use similar in-fill development, including Wyandanch, Huntington Station, Mastic Beach, Hampton Bays, East Northport and East Patchogue. Many of the very small downtowns could also benefit from such in-fill construction, such as Huntington Station South, West Babylon, Islip Terrace, Ronkonkoma, Farmingville, Rocky Point and Eastport.

Recommendation 4: Municipalities should insist that streetlevel storefronts in downtowns have a significant amount of glass frontage, to help create a more positive downtown shopping experience.

Visitors and shoppers enjoy attractive and inviting storefronts. All downtown development should provide continuous glass frontage on the ground level to maintain a traditional downtown storefront feel. Stores should have a first level facade that is transparent [glass] between three feet and eight feet above the ground for at least 70% of the horizontal length of the building facade. Concrete or brick walls, and storefront windows that are dark tinted or closed off with blinds are very unappealing to shoppers on the street. Non-retail uses in particular should maintain an attractive street entrance and storefront windows, to enhance the downtown shopping experience and to avoid creating insipid frontages on pedestrian-oriented main streets. When permits for new construction or renovation of downtown stores are issued, municipalities should insist on significant glass frontage on the street.

Recommendation 5: Municipalities should acquire key parcels near downtown areas for parking and green spaces where needed, and coordinate parking within downtowns.

In recent years, Suffolk County and its towns and villages have created some small new municipal parking lots and public spaces in downtown districts. The Village of Greenport recently created a park in the heart of its downtown area, a successful example of an acquisition for a vibrant public space. These types of efforts should be continued to create (where appropriate) additional pockets of open space in or near downtown districts, sometimes combined with additional public parking. Parcels in downtowns that are in property tax default or that are unfit for commercial use because of fire or neglect should be considered for acquisition by municipalities for public parking or small parks, in accordance with a local plan. Municipalities should consider creating parking plans for certain business districts. Municipal parking lots in some downtown areas are disjointed and not contiguous. An implemented parking plan would improve traffic circulation within and between parking areas and pedestrian circulation to commercial establishments from parking areas. A parking plan would consider targeting parcels contiguous to existing parking parcels for acquisition, swap, or easement. The parking plan should also include recommendations concerning lighting, landscaping, buffering and access to the main roads of the

downtown. Each municipal parking lot in a downtown should be clearly identified with an attractive sign. Attractive signs help improve the appearance of the downtown and parking areas, and are appealing to shoppers. Municipalities should adopt a standard municipal parking sign design. In addition, an attractive and noticeable sign simply stating the name of the community should be installed at each main entrance to the downtown area. Such signs beautify, clearly identify the community to travelers, and create a sense of place.

Recommendation 6: Encourage destination uses to locate in downtown areas.

Downtowns are more than centers of activity. In many cases they are the heart and soul of a community. Yet many of the activities that take place in some downtown areas are daytime activities such as medical offices, dry cleaners and hair and nail salons. Certain types of destination uses will draw consumers at many times of the day and can increase the downtown's vibrancy at night. Restaurants are one way to increase nighttime visitors to a downtown. In addition, outdoor dining could be encouraged to promote an inviting and lively downtown.

Arts and entertainment uses, such as movie theaters and performing arts theaters have been successful in some downtowns. Chain retailers can attract customers but chain retailers should not dominate a downtown and detract from the downtown's authenticity. Other destination uses that some downtown areas may want to attract include: coffee shops, DVD/CD/game retailers, drug stores, antique shops and specialty food markets. Downtowns in higher income areas can also attract uses that can't be found in shopping centers and malls such as high-end dog food and accessory stores, boutique clothing stores, and stores selling handmade items. While it is preferable to retain at least a core retail portion of a downtown area to keep a downtown area vibrant, non-retail uses occupy rentable space and attract foot traffic. In cases where storefronts or buildings are chronically vacant, non-retail uses such as offices, service and institutional uses should be encouraged. Downtown Lindenhurst has recently converted a long-vacant building to a district courthouse, introducing a destination institutional use in its downtown.

Recommendation 7: Downtown business districts should consider forming business improvement districts (BIDs).

A BID could start simply by using funds for basic common services such as cooperative promotion and events. Local BIDs or chambers of commerce should aggressively promote the downtown district and present the district as a unified entity in marketing efforts. Street fairs and community festivals can be part of a successful marketing approach. The specialized personal service offered in downtowns is often not present in shopping centers, and this strength should also be stressed in marketing efforts. Additional BID functions beyond what should be provided by the local municipality can include: street and sidewalk cleaning, trash and litter removal, landscaping maintenance, sign and storefront maintenance, sidewalk repair and security.

Recommendation 8: Public restroom facilities should be provided in large downtowns.

Large downtown areas (those having roughly 100 or more stores) should include public restrooms so that shoppers can be comfortable spending some time in the downtown. The addition of public restrooms and drinking water fountains in downtown areas help make a downtown "people friendly." These facilities should be installed and maintained by the local municipality or another organization concerned with the improvement of the downtown area, such as a BID. Public restrooms currently exist in the following downtowns: Port Jefferson, Greenport, Westhampton Beach, Sag Harbor, Southampton, Bridgehampton and East Hampton. The public restrooms in downtown Bridgehampton were built five years ago by the Town of Southampton with input and cooperation from local civic groups. Other downtown areas should do the same, especially if they hope to attract tourists or recreation shoppers. Downtown areas that could benefit from public restrooms include Huntington, Cold Spring Harbor, Northport, Lindenhurst, Babylon, Bay Shore, Sayville, Patchogue and Riverhead.