August 2000

Non-Residential Development: Community Character Guidelines

GUIDELINES BY TOPIC

Prepared by:

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These Community Character Guidelines were prepared by the Nashua Regional Planning Commission with financial assistance from the NH Office of State Planning and the NH Department of Transportation. The contents of this report reflect the views of the Nashua Regional Planning Commission which is solely responsible for the facts and accuracy of this material. The contents do not necessarily reflect the official views of the above agencies. This report does not constitute a standard, specification or regulation.

Section One

August 2000

Non-Residential Development: Community Character Guidelines

An Overview of Community Character Guidelines

GUIDELINES BY TOPIC

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Nashua Regional Planning Commission

Sustaining a Balance Between Development and Community Character

Planning for growth in an efficient, practical, coherent and sensitive manner enables continued vitality of the community environment. Communities, by determining which resources should be protected in advance of development, create a framework for directing the patterns of future growth in order to achieve the most efficient use of land resources. Community character guidelines provide one tool to assist planners with the accommodation of growth in a manner compatible with maintaining the community's character, enabled under RSA 674:21 Innovative Land Use Controls.

Retaining Community Character: Milford, NH

Overview of Guidelines to Retain Community Character

This section provides an overview of the advantages to implementing community character guidelines. Guidelines articulate acceptable site and architectural design principles and standards that promote rural New England character. They address the negative impacts of development, including aesthetic issues, environmental intrusion, site design, and the relationship to the surrounding community. They also set standards to enhance the overall value and appearance of the community, but are not intended to discourage creative excellence in the design of commercial and industrial projects. It is a means for showing developers exactly how the community expects new growth to appear and function. Most developers will give communities what they want; however, this can only happen if the community can articulate what it expects.

Communities throughout the country have adopted community character guidelines to mitigate growth and inhibit sprawl. Some communities have adopted guidelines that are specific to a particular type of development, such as "big-box" shopping centers, while others have enacted voluntary or regulatory standards that cover every type of development.

Auto Centered "Big-box" Retail: Hudson

"A comprehensive approach to the review process should evaluate the functional, cultural, aesthetic and environmental consequences of design alternatives."

Community character guidelines are only one tool in a comprehensive planning approach to protect community character, which also includes conservation development, access management, non-regulatory resource protection, and flexible road standards, among others. Another tool is the assessment of existing regulations, ordinances and review processes, to identify constraints toward promoting community character, particularly if new growth has not met community expectations. It is assumed that zoning ordinances and regulations ensure that development will occur as articulated in the goals of Master Plans to preserve community character. Review of these documents may reveal inconsistencies between the Master Plan and development codes, that preclude preservation goals. It may be necessary to amend these documents to accommodate growth in a manner that is compatible with the community's character.

Village Center: Lexington, MA

A comprehensive review of codes and procedures will identify regulations that are contrary to the goals of the Master Plan and obstacles to desirable development. Only key development parameters need to be included in the zoning ordinance – density, floor area ratio, building coverage and setbacks. Everything else should become part of site plan and subdivision regulations or design standards to allow for increased flexibility.

Pedestrian Streetscape: Lexington, MA

Flexibility should also be built into the review process, to provide communities with opportunities for innovative approaches that incorporate the most desirable goals and strive for balance between economic development and the conservation of resources. A comprehensive approach to the review process should evaluate the functional, cultural, aesthetic and environmental consequences of design alternatives. The process should be clear and predictable. Community character guidelines may be adopted as a stand-alone document to support the regulations, or individual sections might be incorporated directly into the regulations.

Incentives may be offered in a number of forms, including increased densities or building size or reduced setbacks, in exchange for conservation easements or public improvements of benefit to the community.

Use of Community Character Guidelines

The standards outlined in the community character guidelines will be used in reviewing projects for conformity with overall community design objectives of the Master Plan, in conjunction with the Zoning Ordinance, Subdivision Regulations and Site Plan Regulations. Where these guidelines conflict with ordinances, regulations or codes, the standards of the ordinances, regulations and codes shall prevail.

FUNDAMENTAL DESIGN ELEMENTS

- Front setback
- Site access
- Parking location
- Building scale: height, volume and massing
- Roof shape and pitch
- Windows and doors
- Materials and color
- Proportion and rhythm
- Architectural details
- Canopies, awnings, overhangs
- Franchise design restrictions
- Rear elevations and entrances
- Utility/mechanical functions
- Signs
- Transit provisions
- Orientation of buildings to public street
- Landscaping

Defining and Maintaining Community Character

The Master Plan defines the most desirable elements of the community's character and articulates goals for preservation of resources. The physical patterns of community include town centers, rural roads, open spaces and vistas, orchards, farms, stonewalls, and woodland edges. Open spaces that include sensitive land, prime agricultural land, aquifer recharge areas, trails and recreation areas, and spaces that open to scenic or historic views all represent opportunities for preservation. Communities should identify features to be preserved prior to development, looking for opportunities to provide linkages through greenways.

Preserving Agricultural Heritage: Litchfield

Development Along Road Corridors

Increased traffic and intensified land use patterns have negatively impacted improperly planned road corridors, both visually and functionally. The visual clutter includes a confusing conglomeration of businesses, parking lots, signs and curb-cuts. The capacity and function of these roads have been diminished due to the proliferation of curb-cuts, decreasing safety and efficiency. Pedestrian or bicycle issues have not been considered in the design of road corridors. The level of service has decreased to failure, requiring further road improvements and the erosion of the existing street edge, which increases visual degradation.

Commercial "Big-box": Hudson, NH

Guidelines to Control Sprawl

The modern auto-centered culture, comprised of strip malls, big-box retail centers and disconnected suburbs, have given us a legacy of disposable landscapes, complete with nondescript architecture void of any sense of permanency or relationship to place. This modern landscape, which has been labeled sprawl, is expensive to operate, costly to maintain, and a continued social and ecological threat. Current zoning prescribes this landscape by segregating uses and dictating large lots and excessive setbacks for commercial development. Landscaping is used in inconsistent and ineffective ways to decorate parking lots. Often, there is a total absence of shade trees, both along the street as a community character element, and within developed areas to define spaces and ameliorate the negative impacts of paved surfaces.

"Guidelines address building location and orientation, parking configurations, landscaping, lighting and sign design."

Negative Impacts of Sprawl: 101A Nashua, NH

The desire to control sprawl can only be determined by the legislative body of the community. Discouraging strip development and managing site accessibility will support efforts that encourage compact development on existing road corridors. Site accessibility can be managed through limiting curb cuts to key intersections and requiring linked parking lots behind structures. It is equally important to provide for pedestrian and bicycle networks, both on and off site. The opportunity for pedestrian activity increases when commercial developments have direct pedestrian links to neighborhoods. Quality infill development that maximizes access management could encourage more desirable redevelopment in the future.

The existing roadway corridor should be considered an integral part of a proposed development, with attention given to details enhancing the human experience. In situations where the preservation of agricultural vistas is desirable, the existing vegetation along a corridor may be retained, with the new development tucked into the landscape. In higher density locations where village centered development opportunities exist, the roadway may be directly related to the site by physical and visual connections, including reduced building setbacks along the frontage, street tree patterns, interconnected sidewalks, and architectural details that make buildings attractive from all sides.

Section Two

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Tools For Guiding Non-Residential Growth

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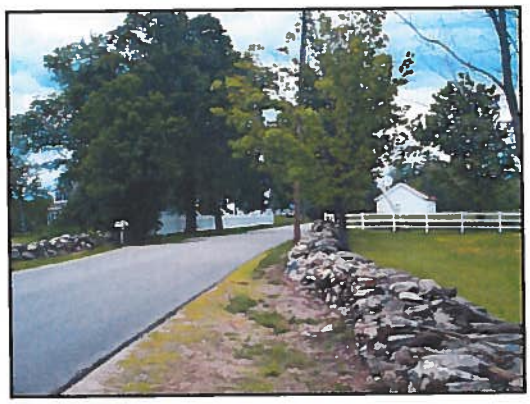
Balancing Growth with Quality of Life

A number of alternatives are available for directing the patterns of new growth, ranging from maintaining the status quo and allowing development to occur according to current codes to the complete replacement of current codes with a comprehensive ensemble of tools to preserve community character. The former may result in the loss of resources, whereas the latter provides the opportunity to effectively balance growth with quality of life. The New Hampshire DOT addressed community design issues along the 157-mile Route 16 road corridor by preparing a community design manual as part of the 1997 Route 16 Corridor Protection Study.

Loss of Character on Once Rural Road: Lowell Road in Hudson

Regulatory Barriers to Innovative Design

Most communities feel protected from the negative impacts of development by their current zoning ordinances and land use regulations. In reality, current land use codes and approval processes can be inefficient, requiring single use zones and excessive development standards, including large lots, wide streets and deep setbacks. The restrictive nature of current zoning adds layers of review to the process. Regulatory barriers and protracted review procedures hinder innovative design. In most communities, traditional patterns of development would not be permitted, requiring applicants to seek variances and waivers, extending the approval process, which adds to project cost. Peterborough, NH, and towns in Nantucket, MA have recently drafted ordinances to allow the continued pattern of its town center, previously precluded by zoning.



Preserving Rural Road Character: Hollis, NH

Until it is gone, many people are unaware of the significant value of the rural landscape to their quality of life. In the recent past, it was common to drive rural highways winding through a peaceful landscape of farms, fields, hilly woodlands and the manmade features of an agricultural heritage. The current landscape of these same roads has resulted from codes that support the development of malls and the proliferation of strip centers along highways. It is important for landowners to understand that development without guidance to maintain community character can result in the loss of those values most treasured in their land. Proposed highway and airport improvements in or near many communities could have undesirable secondary impacts if there are no changes to current land development ordinances and regulations.

"It is important for landowners to understand that development without guidance to maintain community character can result in the loss of those values most treasured in their land."

Community Consensus Building

Communities should determine the course of action for future growth by participating in and expanding upon community profiling to clarify and confirm the community's vision. Strategies for future action should evolve from participatory brainstorming events involving a cross-section of residents, with technical support to facilitate the process. Prior to these meetings, the community should request professional analysis of the master plan, ordinances, regulations, review process and any other documents or issues influencing development. Community resources should also be identified and mapped.

Several important products could result from these participatory exercises. Through consensus building, a master plan for development along the corridors could emerge, identifying nodes of development, segments of limited or protected development, controlled access points, resource protection areas, greenways, trails, and pedestrian/bike routes. Recommendations for land use regulation amendments, revamping the review process, and proposing community character guidelines may also emanate through this process. The results of this process should be mapped, analyzed, packaged and scheduled for adoption in their appropriate forms.

Section Three

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Building Orientation and Site Guidelines

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Site Compatibility Guidelines to Preserve & Enhance Community Character

The site plan should provide for the interrelationship of all site elements with adjacent development and natural features. The design process should include consideration of the impacts of the proposal on the community, the surrounding neighborhood, nearby streets and intersections, and adjacent properties. Buildings and sites should be compatible with their surroundings. Along rural roads, this would require that new development retain the agricultural characteristics of the corridor by preserving views and open space. Community character guidelines based on traditional town patterns perpetuate the best characteristics of a community.

Site Relationships

RELATIONSHIP OF SITE TO SURROUNDING PROPERTY

- Consider site context.
- Incorporate compatible transitions – landscaping, natural features.
- Maintain physical connections – employ access management.
- Protect views through building setbacks, heights, and planting design.
- Locate business and institutional buildings at major intersections, closer to roads, with parking in the rear.

Consider Site Context and Relationship to Surrounding Property: Amherst, NH

"Community character guidelines based on traditional town patterns perpetuate the best characteristics of a community."

RELATIONSHIP OF PROJECT TO THE SITE

- Provide for smooth transitions between streetscape, entrance, landscape
- Maintain height, massing and scale of proposed structure consistent with existing structures
- Parking should minimize pavement, maximize planting, and consider natural drainage

Bank Consistent with Residential Scale: Hudson, NH

RELATIONSHIP OF LANDSCAPE DESIGN TO PROJECT

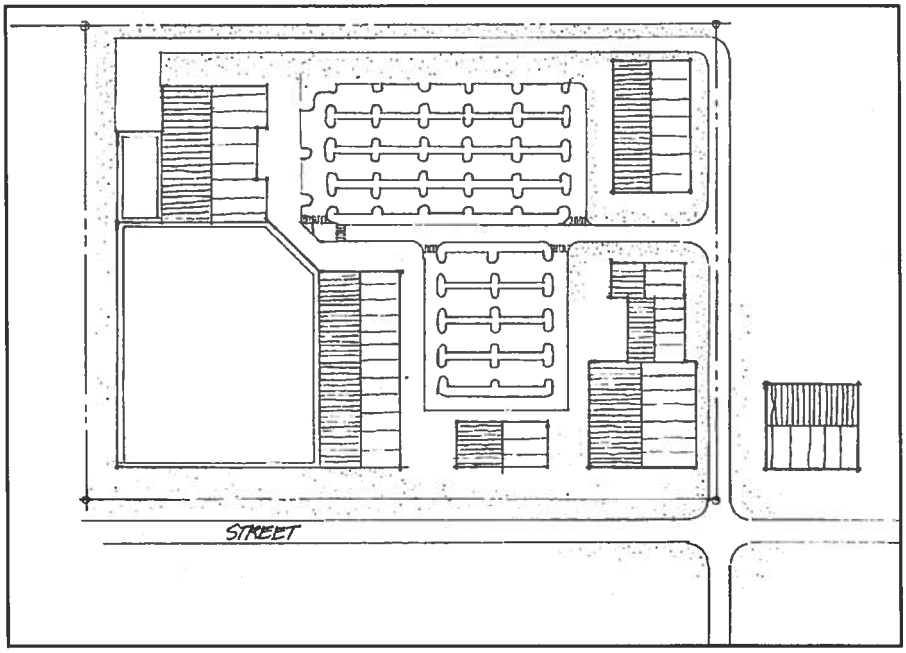
- Maintain existing topography, vegetation, water patterns.
- Provide transitions between building, parking, pedestrian walkways, disabled access,
- Install suitable plant material.
- Provide design details to enhance the pedestrian experience.

Well Landscaped Site Along Street Edge: Nashua, NH

Building Orientation & Siting Guidelines

Building orientation guidelines address the relationships of structures to the street. The best models for establishing guidelines are typically found in the traditional architecture and development patterns of the community. Placement of the building in relation to the surrounding elements is just as important as the design of the building itself. Historically, building facades were oriented parallel to the street, with shallow setbacks and architectural details related to entries reaching out to the streetscape.

Building setbacks can influence the character of the street. Guidelines can provide for appropriate minimum and maximum setbacks. Large scale development could provide for smaller structures away from principle buildings adjacent to the street, and at all street corners to maintain a consistent street edge wall. Multiple structures could be permitted on business and mixed use sites, either as land lease arrangements or as out parcels, with shared parking for the entire development. Shared parking should always be located behind buildings and otherwise screened from view off-site.



Large Scale Commercial Development: Smaller Structures Along Street

Preserving Visual Quality Along Streets

Where the preservation of rural vistas is desirable, the existing vegetation along a road corridor may be retained with the new development tucked into the landscape. Internal access drives could be developed like town streets, with attention to pedestrian scale and access, and parking areas broken into smaller landscaped lots. In higher density locations where village centered development opportunities exist, the roadway may be directly related to the site by physical and visual connections, including reduced building setbacks along the frontage, street tree patterns, interconnected sidewalks, and architectural details that make buildings attractive from all sides.

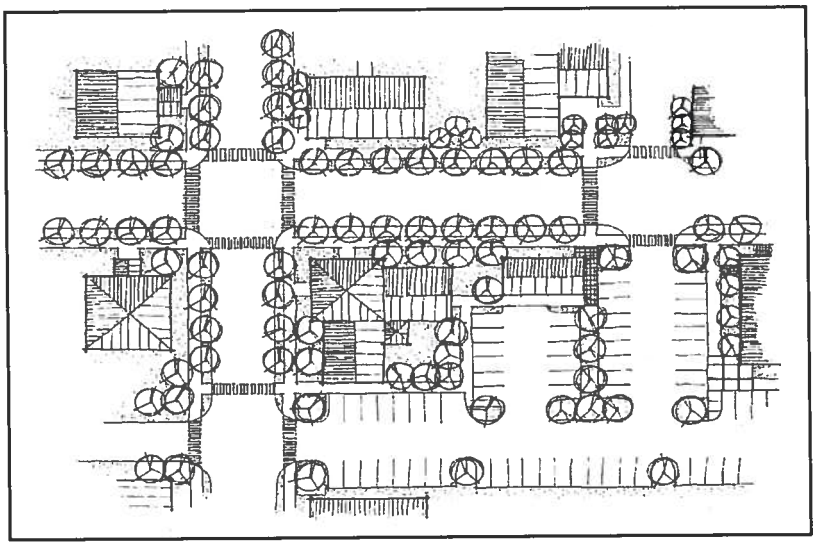
"Shared parking should always be located behind buildings and otherwise screened from view off-site."

Maintain Natural Buffer Along Street: Bedford, NH

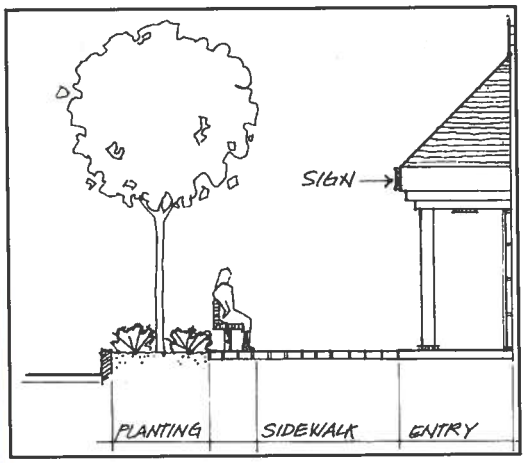
Village Centered Development: Lexington, MA

Building Orientation

- Building elevation plans depicting all four sides, and/or visual simulation techniques showing the impact of the development from all sides should be required for submittal with each application.
- The proposed building orientation should respect the orientation of surrounding buildings, existing pedestrian paths and sidewalks, and the orientation of surrounding streets.
- Building facades should be oriented parallel to the street and maintain a consistent street edge in relationship to adjacent structures.
- Buildings should be sited to maximize public comfort by providing shaded public outdoor areas, minimizing glare, and facilitating breezes.
- Buildings should be oriented so that entrances are clearly identifiable and directly accessible from a sidewalk. Buildings should be accessible for pedestrians, bicyclists, and future public transit users.



Buildings Oriented Parallel to Street for Consistent Street Edge

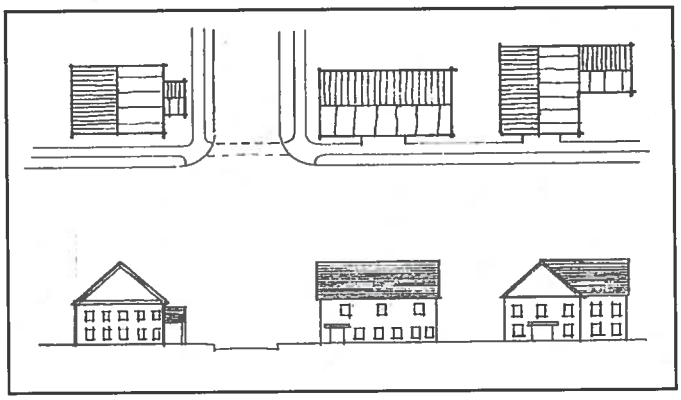


Buildings Sited for Pedestrians

Buildings Oriented for Consistent Street Edge: Mashpee, MA

Orientation of Roof to Street

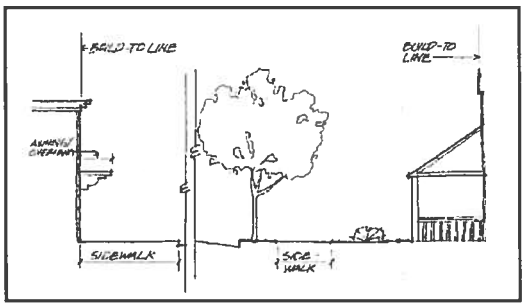
- Buildings and additions should be sited to maintain existing vistas when possible.
- Major roof ridge should be parallel or perpendicular to street.



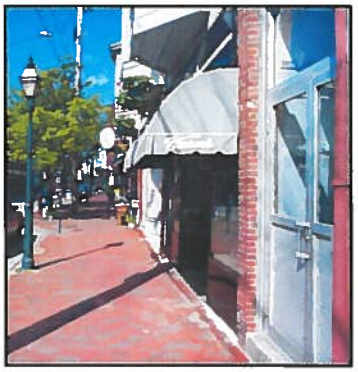
Roof Lines Parallel or Perpendicular to Street

Desirable Setback Encroachments

- Porches, awnings, arcades and overhangs may encroach into setbacks.



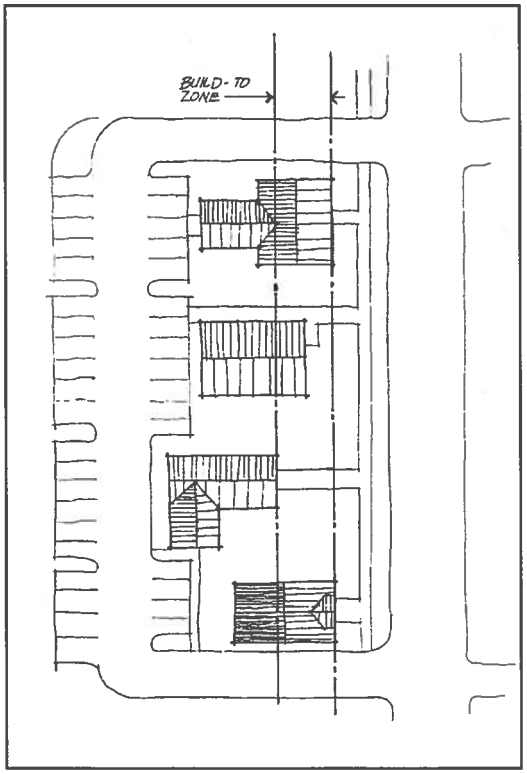
Porches & Awnings Encroach Setbacks



Awnings & Overhangs: Nashua

Build to Zones

- Building setbacks can influence the character of the street, depending upon whether or not it is desirable for development to occur along the edge of the road in a village setting, or be set back a distance from the road to maintain a more open, rural corridor.
- For those sections of communities determined by the Planning Board to most appropriately be developed with the characteristic of the village, building setbacks could be in accordance with a "build-to" zone which allows a minimum fifteen (15) foot building setback and a maximum thirty-five (35) foot building setback from all public street rights-of-way.



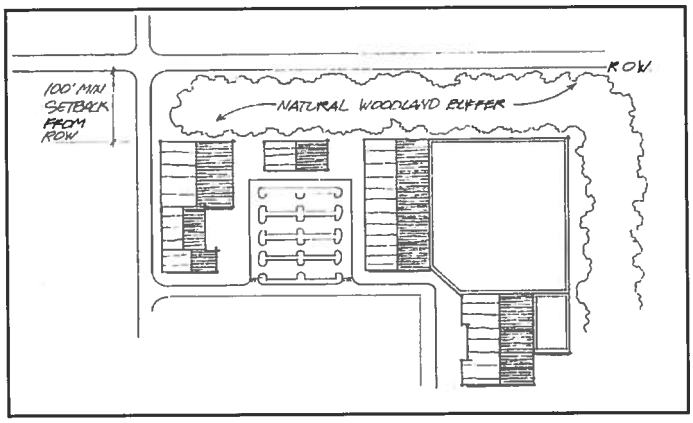
Build-to-Zone: Define Street Edge with Architecture and Street Trees

Street Edge Defined: Lexington, MA

Street Edge Defined by Architecture & Trees: Nashua, NH

Rural Character Setbacks

- When greater setbacks are desired, the building setback should be no less than 100' from the road.



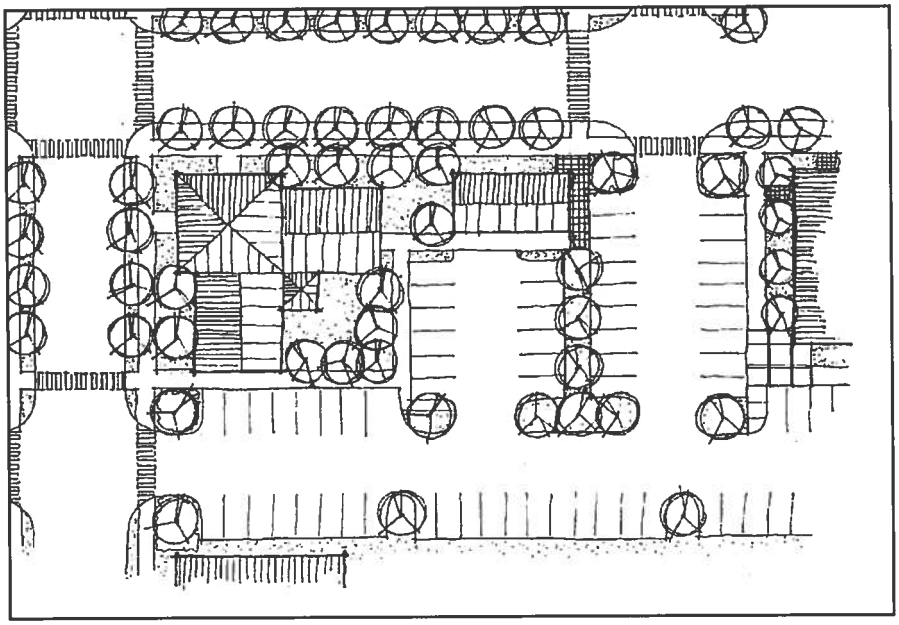
Retaining Undisturbed Buffers Along Street

Natural Buffers Along Street Edge Preserved: Hudson, NH & Andover, MA

Buildings Along Street Edge/Parking in Rear

- Large scale development should provide for smaller structures away from principle buildings adjacent to the street and at all street corners to maintain a consistent street edge wall.

- Multiple structures should be permitted on business and mixed use sites, either as land lease arrangements or as out parcels, with shared parking for the entire development.



Buildings Along Street Edge with Shared Parking to Side and Rear

Section Four

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Non-Residential Development: Community Character Guidelines

Building Design Guidelines

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Building Scale

Guidelines for building design should be flexible enough to allow contemporary interpretations of traditional styles. Maintaining a traditional scale in commercial structures results in building design that relates to pedestrian scale. Roof shapes, height, building materials, fenestration and doors are key design issues. Building scale relationships must be considered, and appropriate transitions provided where a change of scale is proposed or required. Stepping building height, breaking up the mass of the building and shifting building placement can help mitigate the impact of differing building scales and intensities.

- Proposed commercial or industrial buildings should respect the scale of adjacent residential buildings, and provide an orderly transition to the different scale of development.
- In most cases, commercial development should maintain traditional residential scale throughout the project, based on the pattern of community centers.

Commercial Structures with Traditional Residential Scale and Style: Nashua, NH

Unified Architectural Design

- A unified architectural design should be incorporated into each commercial center, including scale, style, materials, details and color.

Unified Architectural Theme: Hollis, NH

Coordinated Architectural Design: Amherst, NH

- The architectural design of free-standing pad buildings should be consistent with the design of the remainder of the business center.
- Where centers require updating, pad buildings should be remodeled in conjunction with an upgrade of the entire shopping center.

Building Height and Roof Lines

"Maintaining a traditional scale in commercial structures results in building design that relates to pedestrian scale."

Adequate Roof Overhangs: Hollis, NH

- Business structures should not be less than 1½ stories high, and not exceed 3 stories in height.
- Avoid long unbroken expanses of roofs through the use of changes in ridge line, dormers or chimneys.
- Peaked roof forms should be required with a minimum 6:12 roof pitch and gable ends oriented to the street when possible.
- Roofs should have adequate overhangs. Roll roofing, tar and gravel, plastic or fiberglass roofing materials are not appropriate.

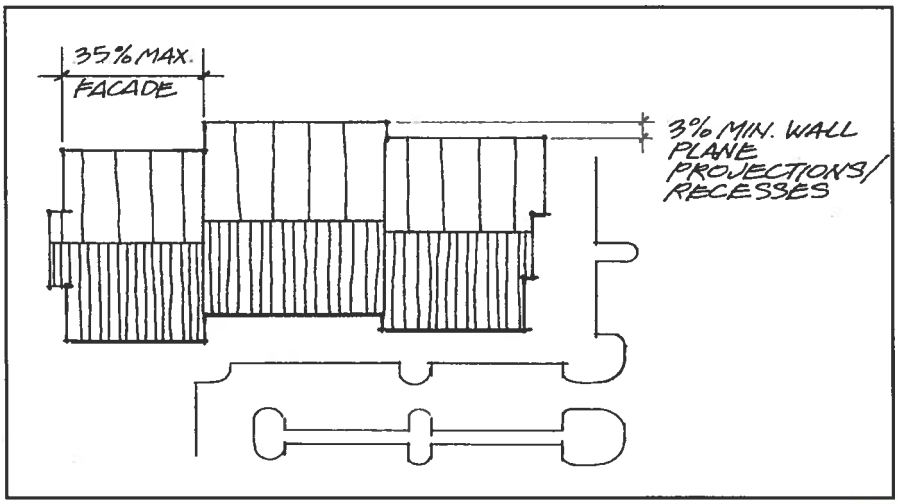
Building Details

Building Details: Lexington, MA

- All sides of a structure should exhibit design continuity, with all sides improved.
- External details in building facades, entries, stairways, retaining walls and other features provide visual interest, enrichment and texture.

Building Details for Visual Interest

- New development should incorporate the use of strong vertical and/or horizontal reveals. Off-sets, and three dimensional details between surface planes should be used to create shadow lines and break up flat surfaces.
- Facade and exterior walls should incorporate minimum of three (3) percent wall plane projections/ recesses. The maximum uninterrupted facade length should not exceed thirty-five (35) percent of the total facade.



Wall Plane Projections/Recesses

Pedestrian Approaches

- Walls facing streets and pedestrian approaches should have display windows, recessed windows, detailed entry areas, awnings, and prominent sills.
- Windows and entry areas should cover a minimum of sixty (60) percent of the entire wall length.

Pedestrian Oriented Business Facade: Nashua, NH

- Rear entrances for commercial buildings should be designed with the same sensitivity to detail as street side entrances.
- Buildings and windows should be located to maximize occupant surveillance of entries, parking lots, and public spaces.

Rear Entrance to Commercial Use: Nashua, NH

Clearly Defined Entries

"Roof shapes, height, building materials, fenestrations and doors are key design issues."

Well Defined Entry: Lexington, MA

Pedestrian Amenities: Lexington, MA

- The building design should provide for clearly defined, highly visible entries with a minimum of three of the following details:
  - porticos
  - canopies
  - overhangs
  - arcades
  - recesses or projections
  - raised cornice parapets over door
  - arches with detail (tile work or moldings) integrated with building
  - outdoor patios
  - display windows
  - integral planters
  - wing walls with planters or seating

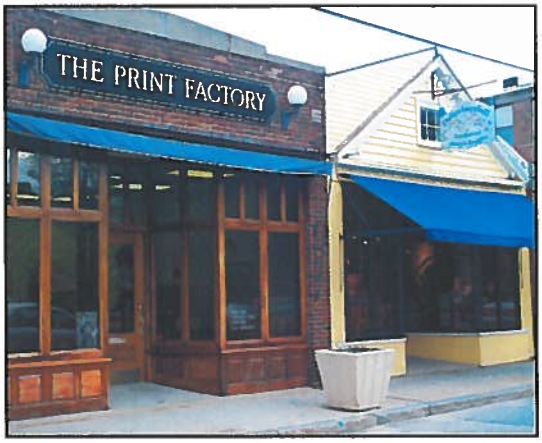
Building Materials

Appropriate Building Materials: Hudson, NH

- Siding should be clapboard, vertical board, brick, stone, and wood shingles or shakes.
- Alternative siding, such as vinyl, should be considered, where attention has been given to trim details around windows, doors, corners, fascia, and eaves.

Windows and Doors: Details

- All building elements and details should be in proportion to the building.
- Doors and window openings should be proportional to facade length and height.
- Large plate glass windows should be broken up with mullions or muttons.
- Windows and doorways should be encased with trim.



Windows and Doorways Encased in Trim: Nashua, NH

Facades with New England Character Elements: Large Windows Broken up with Mullions: Lexington, MA and Milford & Nashua, NH

Window Treatment: Lexington, MA

Windows Relate to Building Scale: Nashua, NH

Parking Lot Entry Well Defined: Nashua, NH

Section Five

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Access Management

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Managing Site Access

Access management is a tool that is employed to minimize site access conflicts and maximize the mobility of road corridors. This tool emphasizes mobility for automobiles with attention toward minimizing auto/pedestrian-bicycle conflicts. Access management provides a number of benefits both on and off site.

- Access management limits the number of places vehicles enter and leave a roadway and reduces deceleration and turning movements in travel lanes. The obvious benefits include reduction in accidents, lower travel times, and increased capacity of the roadway.
- There is a cost benefit by extending the useful life of a road.
- Access management contributes to quality of life by relieving congestion, causing a positive impact on fuel consumption, air quality and travel time saved.

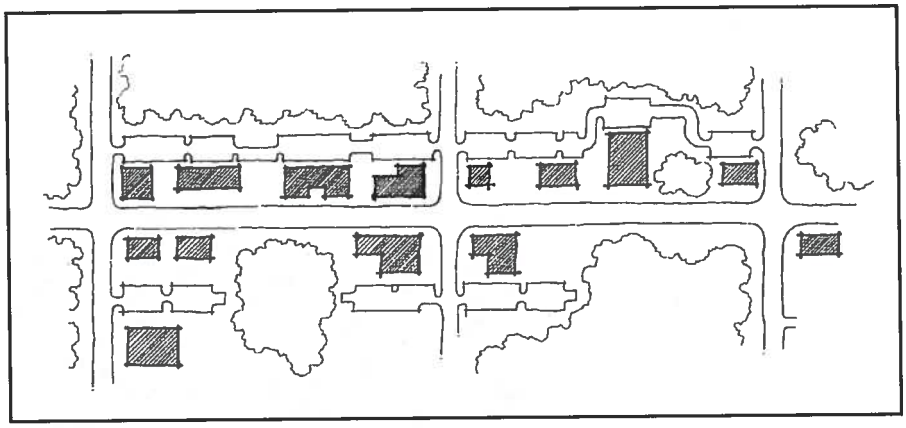
Interconnected Parking Lots: Nashua, NH

Curb cuts on State highways are permitted through the NH Department of Transportation. Site and subdivision plan approval includes the review of curb cuts, generally conditioned upon final approval by the State. There are maximum numbers and widths of curb cuts permitted per site; however, the NH Department of Transportation supports the policies of access management and encourages implementation along State roads.

Interconnected Parking Lots

Interconnected Parking Lots: Nashua, NH

- All projects subject to site plan or subdivision review should provide interconnecting driveways or easements for future construction of driveways to all property boundaries.
- Interior parking lots should provide for shared use and interconnected drives.



Interconnected Parking Lots & Limited Curb Cuts

- Interconnecting driveways should provide and promote vehicular and pedestrian access between adjacent lots without accessing the highway.
- Driveways should be designed to provide safe and controlled access to existing adjacent developments.
- Every effort should be made by the Planning Board to require construction of these driveways in anticipation of future developments.

"Access management provides a number of benefits both on and off site when used in combination with linked parking lots."

Limiting Curb Cuts

Limiting Curb Cuts: Fishkill, NY

- Curb cuts along road corridors should be limited. Whenever possible, they should be restricted to controlled collector access drives. Such drives provide the main circulation network within an area of proposed development to be shared by adjacent lots or premises.

Driveway Alignment/Design

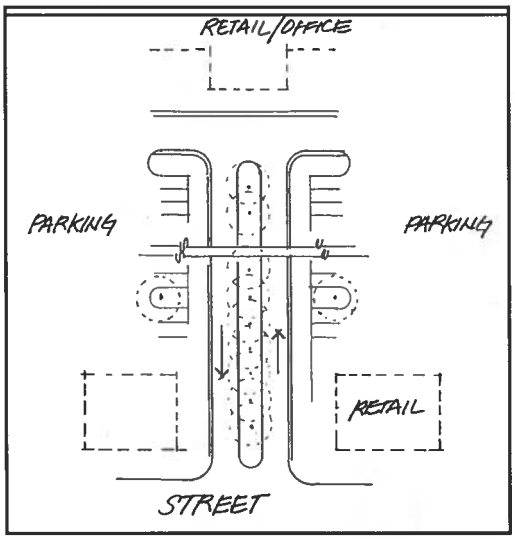
Whenever possible, the centerlines of all new driveways should be aligned with existing driveways and road intersections on the opposite side of the highway. Otherwise, the minimum distance between driveways and road intersections on both sides of a highway should be measured from the centerline of the driveways at the right-of-way line and should be a function of the posted speed in accordance with the table to the right.

Minimum Distance Between Driveways

Highway Speed (MPH)	Minimum Spacing
35	150'
40	185'
45	230'
50	275"

Source: "Access Management for Streets and Highways"
Federal Highway Administration, 1982

- The angle of approach for all driveways should be approximately 90 degrees.
- All non-residential development along the frontage of road corridors should have a minimum of six (6) inch granite curb along the roadway and through the radii of any access point.
- The minimum throat length of a driveway should be of adequate length to accommodate the queuing of the maximum number of vehicles, as defined by the peak period of operation identified in the traffic study.



Access Driveway: Adequate Throat Length

- Lots with frontage on both an arterial highway and an adjacent intersecting road should not be permitted to have access to the arterial highway. Waivers should be considered when it can be demonstrated that other potential access points would cause greater environmental or traffic impacts.

Limited Curb Cuts to Access Drive: Nashua, NH

Collector Drives

Collector Drive with Limited Curb Cuts: Nashua, NH

- Curb cuts along access roads should only be permitted for parking areas.
- Curb cuts along access collector drives should be designed to consider the safety and convenience of pedestrians.

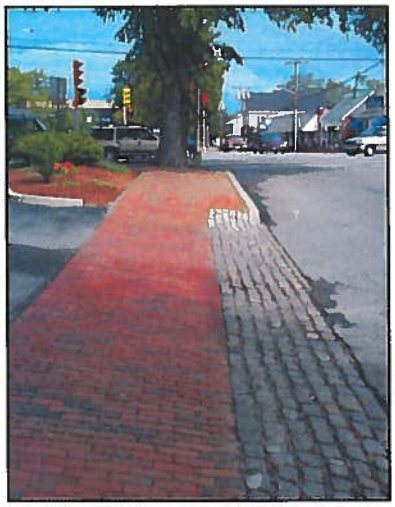
Curb Cut Design

Walkway Over Curb Cut: Nashua, NH & Orleans, MA

- Curb cut radii should be fifteen (15) feet and should be designed to slow down traffic speeds through the turning movement.
- Curb cut width should be a maximum twenty-four (24) feet for two-way access and twelve (12) feet for single access drives.

Pedestrians, Bicycles & Transit

Downtown Transit Facility Nashua, NH



Continuity of Sidewalk Over Curb Cut: Orleans, MA

- Sidewalks and bicycle lanes should be provided along the frontage of corridors and both sides of all collector access drives.
- The continuity of the sidewalk surface should be maintained over the curb cut, which should be marked by accent strips of brick, concrete block or textured paving materials.
- Consider the locations for future public transit accommodations, including bus pull-outs and shelters.