

## NESEA Building Energy 2000: Renew 2000 Conference

Track 4: The Bridge from Today to Tomorrow—Forum on Livable Communities

### *Smart Growth and New Urbanism in Onondaga County*

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I was invited to talk about the charrette led by Andres Duany to produce a Settlement Plan for Onondaga County based on the principles of New Urbanism. The charrette was the most exciting project in my career and holds great promise for the quality of life and economic growth in the county. Because this project is the third major planning event for us in about 10 years, I would like to outline the process around all three events. These events include the adoption of the 2010 Development Guide by the County in 1991, a public lecture series on new urbanism in 1996 and 1997, and finally the Settlement Plan and the eight-day public charrette in 1999.

Onondaga County is a metropolitan county in central New York with a population of 468,000; Syracuse with a population of about 155,000 is located at the center. Authority over land use planning belongs to the City, 19 towns, and 15 villages; most municipalities do not have professional planners on staff.

**I. 2010 Development Guide** The Settlement Plan is a major step in implementing of the county's 2010 Development Guide. The Guide is a policy plan, based on collaborative decision making. It uses the county's responsibility for roads, water supply and wastewater transportation and treatment to direct growth to existing urban areas and community centers. It is county policy not to extend or subsidize trunk sewers and water lines for residential growth. Economic growth is the county's primary goal; a high quality of life, an attractive built, a health natural environment, and a stable local tax environment are crucial means to that end.

The Guide was drafted and adopted with strong leadership by County Executive Nick Pirro and Legislative Chairman Bill Sanford, Onondaga County. It is a fiscally conservative plan by necessity. During the past thirty years the county's urban area has doubled but now houses 16,000 fewer people than in 1970. Developers had been adding an average of ten miles of linear infrastructure every year for a declining population. The city is losing population, jobs, and housing. The Guide is a "Smart Growth" strategy. The county could not sustain this pattern of capital investment while maintaining the 100-year-old sewers in Syracuse.

**Participation** We started the process of participation with the county department heads who were responsible for infrastructure and capital budgeting, on the theory that every government should and probably did have policies on capital investments and regulations related to permits. Many were concerned about the costs of sprawl and excess infrastructure capacity at the center but their concerns had never been discussed. They became our first partners.

Our next partners came from the Environmental Management Council. They recognized that a smaller urbanized area meant less impact on the natural environment. The process then extended to the Infrastructure Commission, a group appointed by the legislature to address concerns of developers, mostly with roads and pipes. They support the goal of economic growth and came to accept the need for fiscal restraint. They concluded that knowing the rules of the game ahead of time and a level playing field were their most important concerns and the Guide addressed these. Finally the draft Guide was presented to city, towns, and villages planning board members and elected officials at a full day meeting of the Onondaga County Planning Federation. Many towns did not see the implications of the plan; some argued that it was their turn to grow; but most concurred with the County that cost-effective infrastructure was crucial if we were to become a competitive location for economic investments.

After five years, we checked back with the same participants. We updated the Guide to make it more user friendly and added graphics but retained the goals, strategies and policies; it was readopted. We learned during this process that municipal boards needed a more detailed vision of the future and better regulatory tools. We expect change and need to make existing community centers competitive with green field sites. Local planning board members were frustrated because current zoning did not require—or in some cases even permit – growth or in-fill development in the traditional pattern that exists.

**II. New Urbanism** New urbanism came to us through Mark Falcone of Pioneer Development. Mark was Chairman of the county's Economic Development Commission. His position was that there were many groups out trying to market the county, but that no one was invested in product development, that is protecting the quality of our historic village center and urban neighborhoods. Mark suggested a lecture series on new urbanism that we billed as "Onondaga County-Home of the Best Small Towns and Neighborhoods in America". Pioneer Development sponsored a full day seminar by Andres Duany for the Planning Federation and the public. The program drew four times our usual attendance.

Andres Duany is a dynamic and informative speaker. He provided the community with a vocabulary of urban design and an illustrated primer on the values of urbanism. His slides contrasted the good, the bad and the ugly found across urban and suburban America. The neighborhood was defined as the fundamental human habitat, a place with a five minute walk from edge to center where residents can live, work, shop, and gather. The importance of the street, the block and the building in shaping public spaces was illustrated. The ratio of building height to street width as a key factor in creating inviting public spaces was related to high real estate values. The complexity of function and spaces in a city street was contrasted to the single purpose design of most suburban streets and roads.

Choice in how we spend our time and money (in and on cars and commuting or on some other activity) was suggested as an important difference between quality of life and standard of living. The shift in public capital budgets away from facilities for people—sidewalks, parks, schools, libraries, town halls, and post offices—toward facilities to move stuff—pipes and roads—represents public choices that should be examined anew. And finally Andres outlined the role of a regional: to designate protected open space and transportation corridors and thus structure the metropolitan area.

Over 400 people invested eight hours in this program; they left with the notion that there is a better way to manage the built environment. We followed this success was by programs on Main Street Retailing (Bob Gibbs), Urban Design-Charleston Style (Mayor Joseph Riley), and traffic calming (Walter Kulash) with the help of Pioneer Development and new support from local engineering firms.

**III. The Settlement Plan** The response to this lecture series was so positive that the Chairman of the County Legislature worked with the Industrial Development Agency and the Onondaga County Water Authority to fund The Settlement Plan. We had three goals: community understanding of urban design, a detailed vision for the built environment, and model codes based on the New Urbanism principals. We appointed a Steering Committee of community leaders and stakeholders in development including residents.

In June of last year, we asked every municipality for a resolution expressing interest in the process, mostly to avoid stepping on toes of local officials. Within two weeks, 20 municipalities responded and took the initiative to recommend pilot neighborhoods.

In September, we hosted a “Kick-off Session” for local officials. Andres Duany explained the approach, the need for free exchange of ideas with businesses and residents in the pilot areas. We toured the County to select pilot neighborhoods. The pilots were chosen to illustrate a range of urban design issues from traffic and brown fields to growth patterns and dead malls, in city, village, suburban and rural locations. Enough economic energy to permit implementation was an important criteria. Although the pilots were to be model or ideal plans, we hoped that they would have enough power to lead to positive change in those neighborhoods—to create highly visible successes worth emulating.

**The Charrette** In October, Andres Duany brought a team of 20 architects and planners together for the eight-day charrette. The team included a local design firm for two reasons: to provide detailed knowledge of local conditions and to build a local knowledge base for ongoing implementation. The entire team joined in a bus tour of the county and the pilots on the first day. That evening Andres Duany gave a public lecture to 500 local officials, architects, and residents. The next five days were filled with meetings about specific pilot neighborhoods, design and transportation issues, market issues, and local plans and policies. Participants were invited but all sessions were open to the public.

The process was fascinating. The team was broken down into eight project groups, which worked within earshot of the charrette meetings, made site visits and met with local stakeholders. Designs evolved as site information came together, changes were made in response to suggestions overheard from the charrette meetings. Andres maintained unifying influence on all the work groups and led most of the charrette meetings. There was so much to learn and ideas changed so fast that I was reluctant to leave the charrette site while any of the consultants remained, and they worked way into the night.

On the last day the team completed designs, prepared a power point presentation of digital photographs and designs. In the evening, Andres made a public presentation of the plans and designs that included recommendations for incentives based on local market constraints and addressed code and maintenance issues faced by the complex conditions found in the city.

More than 1500 people participated in the charrette and public presentations. The presentations were videotaped, placed in the library, and offered at cost. We anticipated local demand; we were very pleased by demand statewide.

**The Settlement Plan** The Settlement Plan consists of three documents—The County Plan and Pilot Neighborhoods, TND Design Guidelines, and The TND Code. The County Plan is based on preservation of the most desirable or important natural features and a transportation policy based on a street network and the concept of "townless highways and highwayless towns".

A model town plan illustrates a the coordination between the County plan—open space and transportation plans—and provides incentives for preservation of rural highway frontage and creation of new hamlets at state and county crossroads.

Design solutions to typical planning problems are provided for seven pilot neighborhoods. The Butternut area of Syracuse illustrates the transect of urban patterns from urban core to neighborhood edge and the use of the Traditional Neighborhood Development Code. Code enforcement based on neighborhood election of some standards and citation and fines modeled on traffic tickets were suggested.

Plans for the village of Liverpool call for traffic calming Main Street and relocating commuter traffic from the six-lane arterial that brutally bisects the village center to the Thruway just north of the village. The objective is to create a destination retail street and promote pedestrian and vehicular links with Onondaga Lake Park. Redesign of the Onondaga Lake Parkway as a park road rather than a commuter chute was also proposed.

The Fayetteville Mall evolves in three stages from a retail wasteland into a town center with a library, police station, YMCA, main street shops, mixed commercial, light industrial, and residential uses for several market segments. A stream re-emerges from beneath the parking lot to provide a creek walk, a pond and skating rink that increase flood storage potential.

Bayberry Plaza, a successful sixties neighborhood strip center, is turned to face the neighborhood instead of the parking lot. Civic uses, a village green, and new housing enhance the pedestrian appeal from the adjacent Radburn style neighborhood, and new connections were added between the arterial and the neighborhood.

Baldwinsville and Jamesville designs encourage growth in patterns that reflect existing urban fabric, despite land holdings by multiple owners with individual development schedules

Harbor West is a brownfield in Syracuse next to the former Barge Canal Terminal. Its neighbors include the extremely successful Carousel Center and mixed-use redevelopment of an abandoned industrial area. The Harbor West plan illustrates the potential for a new neighborhood on a pedestrian scale centered on an elementary school. It provides for a variety of housing types, designed to buffer residents and pedestrians from traffic, include neighborhood scale retail and a public green.

The pilot designs illustrate how existing communities could be much more attractive; they have already generated a great deal of enthusiasm and led to implementation initiatives. But in my opinion the most powerful products are the Traditional Neighborhood Design Guidelines and the Traditional Neighborhood Development Code. The Guidelines systematically illustrate urban design concepts and will be useful to developers and municipalities for many years. The Codes for regional, green field and in-fill projects provide a parallel zoning system based on urban design for specific settings from the urban core to the urban edge. Mixed uses are proposed in ratios that vary over the transect; standards for street designs of varying width and capacity, architectural and landscape code options complete the codes.

**Implementation** The charrette and Andres Duany's ideas received excellent coverage by the Syracuse Newspapers. Articles extended over the next two months with a weekly column focused on each pilot neighborhood. Three communities are actively pursuing implementation of the pilot plans. A neighborhood plat designed by DPZ is in the process of subdivision approval in the pilot town. The traffic recommendations for Liverpool have been modeled and endorsed by the Metropolitan Planning Organization and outreach to municipalities on new urbanism street networks is part of the MPO work program. Local consultants have completed suburban corridor studies using TND design guidelines.

The public response suggests that the process succeeded in generating a shared vision, defining locations for future settlements, and providing better regulatory tools for municipalities. The County will assist local boards in adapting codes to unique town and village conditions. Dialog with local officials and state and county transportation department heads will continue. We hope to use Tea 21 funds to recreate our Main Streets.

We feel strongly that a high quality of life (choice in employment, recreation, and neighborhood setting, pedestrian quality street networks, rational traffic mobility, clean air and water) is key to a the county's economic future.