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PRACTICE DESIGN GUIDELINES

A large, semi-transparent orange-tinted image of a brick clock tower with a dome, serving as the background for the cover. The tower has two clock faces and a sign that reads 'ASHPEL'.

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Controlling Strip Development with Design Guidelines

By Ross A. Moldoff, AICP

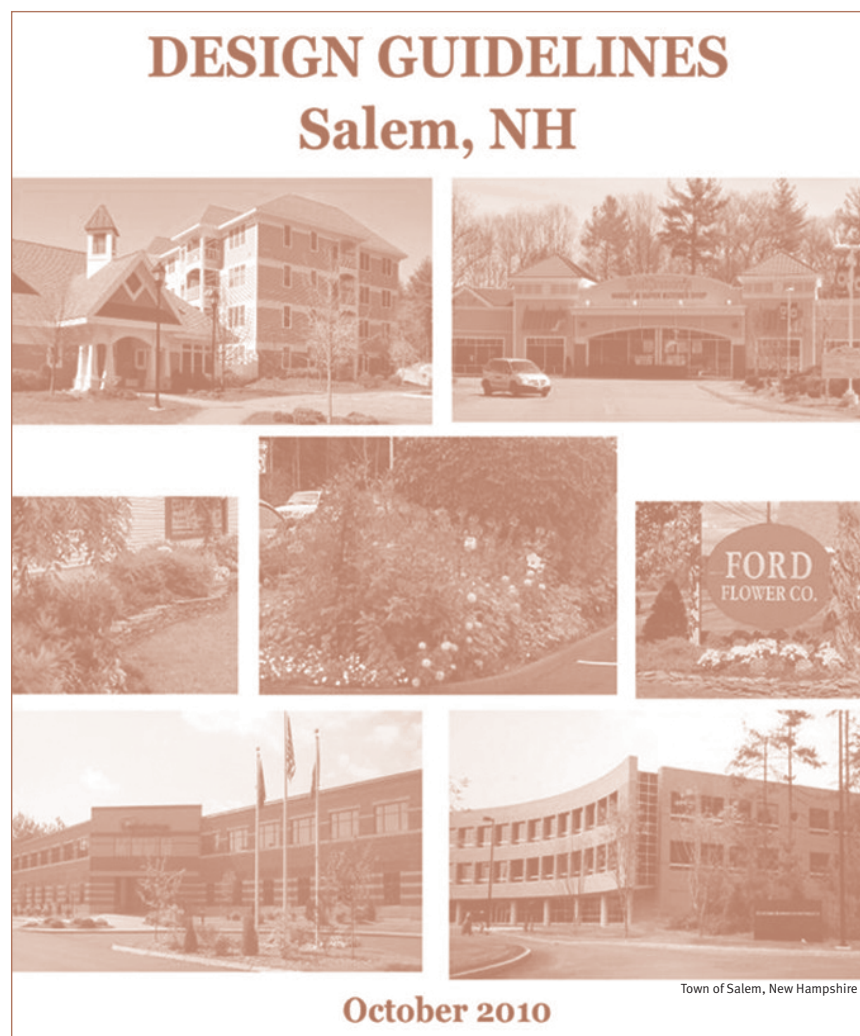
Design guidelines are a relatively new tool for controlling the appearance of development.

Many communities have regulations for the architectural design of retail or big box buildings, along with requirements for landscaping, signage, lighting, and other similar topics. Design guidelines take these regulations a step further by focusing on illustrations and photographs to clarify what the desired type of development looks like. Pictures eliminate much of the guesswork about what a regulation means. A visual depiction of a regulation is much easier for staff, planning board members, and applicants to understand. The great benefit of design guidelines is to allow all parties involved in the preparation or review of a development proposal to see what is required or preferred with photographs and illustrations, thereby reducing wrong interpretations that can lead to costly delays in the approval process.

The following article is based on a presentation at the American Planning Association's National Planning Conference in Boston in April 2011. It highlights the experiences of Salem, New Hampshire, and Cape Cod, Massachusetts, using design guidelines to control strip development.

SALEM, NEW HAMPSHIRE'S ROUTE 28 STRIP

Salem, New Hampshire, is a bedroom community of 30,000 people located 32 miles north of Boston. Salem is home to Rockingham Racetrack (horse racing), Canobie Lake Park (amusement park), and a six-mile-long commercial strip along NH Route 28 known as South and North Broadway. Strip development as used here is defined as a linear pattern of retail businesses and other uses along a road corridor characterized by one-story commercial buildings surrounded by parking lots, with a



➡ The purpose of Salem's new design guidelines is to guide the appearance of new projects, to illustrate and expand current design regulations, and to help applicants understand what the town wants. The document includes chapters on site planning, architecture, landscaping, lighting, and signage.

ASK THE AUTHOR JOIN US ONLINE!

Go online during the month of November to participate in our “Ask the Author” forum, an interactive feature of *Zoning Practice*. Ross Moldoff, AICP, and Sarah Korjeff will be available to answer questions about this article. Go to the APA website at www.planning.org and follow the links to the Ask the Author section. From there, just submit your questions about the article using the e-mail link. The author will reply, and *Zoning Practice* will post the answers cumulatively on the website for the benefit of all subscribers. This feature will be available for selected issues of *Zoning Practice* at announced times. After each online discussion is closed, the answers will be saved in an online archive available through the APA *Zoning Practice* web pages.

About the Authors

Ross Moldoff, AICP, has been the planning director for Salem, New Hampshire, for 28 years and provides staff support for the Planning Board and Conservation Commission. Moldoff has extensive experience in subdivision and site plan permitting as well as writing and enforcing regulations and zoning ordinances. He has taught courses on Controlling Strip Development, Managing Residential Growth, and Evaluating Development Proposals for the University of New Hampshire Continuing Education Program. He holds a bachelor's degree in Economics and Environmental Studies from Colby College and a master's degree in Regional Planning from the University of Massachusetts.

Sarah Korjeff is a planner and historic preservation specialist at the Cape Cod Commission, a regional planning and regulatory agency serving the 15 towns in Barnstable County, Massachusetts. She works with communities to develop bylaws and design guidelines that protect the region's distinctive character, referencing historic architectural forms and past development patterns. Korjeff coordinated production of the Cape Cod Commission's *Designing the Future to Honor the Past*, and was a principal author of the commission's latest design guidelines publication, *Contextual Design on Cape Cod: Design Guidelines for Large-Scale Development*. She holds a bachelor's degree in History from Middlebury College and a master's degree in Historic Preservation from the University of Pennsylvania.

significant amount of pavement visible from the roadway, multiple driveway openings, large signs, and a dependency on automobiles for access and circulation.

Salem's Route 28 strip contains more than 300 retail businesses, including big box retailers, several large shopping centers, and dozens of smaller strip malls and individual stores. Just off the strip sits the 1.1-million-square-foot Mall at Rockingham Park, the largest enclosed mall in New Hampshire. Since 1984 more than 3.6 million square feet of retail space has been approved in Salem.

The strip in Salem was originally developed in the 1950s and 1960s with little regard for design. Retailers wanted to be in Salem because of its location and the lack of a sales tax in New Hampshire. The town wanted tax revenue to support the services needed for a growing residential population. Property owners wanted to develop sites at the lowest possible cost. The dominant development style along the strip was cement-block and sheet-metal buildings with flat roofs, massive parking lots, little if any landscaping, giant signs, and multiple curb cuts.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO IMPROVE THE STRIP

Over the years we tried many different techniques to control strip development and improve the aesthetic character along

Route 28, including rezoning commercial lots to noncommercial districts, limiting the size of retail stores, reducing the allowable size and height of signs, requiring more landscaping and buffers, imposing impact fees, and regulating traffic management and architectural design. Although all these regulations improved the quality of new development, many applicants and planning board members did not understand what the town actually wanted. The design regulations were simply words in a long document filled with many other requirements. Various people interpreted the text in different ways. It was not unusual to have applicants negotiate specific design features with the planning board at public meetings, which usually took lots of time and left both sides uncomfortable with the result. I began to realize that the text-based regulations were not good enough to deal with complex design issues.

GOOD EXAMPLES OF DESIGN GUIDELINES

For many years, I felt design guidelines were the missing link in our quest to improve the aesthetic character of Route 28. Guidelines use photographs and drawings to illustrate the desired form of development. One of the early design guideline documents that influenced my thinking was *Designing the Future to Honor the Past: Design Guidelines for Cape Cod*, prepared by the Cape Cod Commission in

1994. It uses photographs, drawings, and text to present detailed guidelines for open spaces, roadways, architecture, adaptive reuse, infill construction, landscaping, accessibility, parking, outdoor lighting, and signage. A unique feature of these guidelines is a model case study for commercial strip development with sequenced illustrations of existing conditions and phased redevelopment.

Another document I consulted was *Design Guidelines for the Route One Corridor in Falmouth, Maine*, produced by Terrence DeWan and Associates in 1997. This booklet is about 50 pages long and contains large (4-inch by 4.5-inch) photographs with brief explanations. Guidelines for architectural design and signage are presented as brief bullet-points. The format of the document and the simplicity of the messages make it very easy to understand.

INTRODUCING DESIGN GUIDELINES TO SALEM

In 2010 the Town of Salem received a grant from the New Hampshire Department of Transportation to prepare design guidelines as part of the Community Technical Assistance Program for the Interstate Route 93 expansion project.

We started this project with a meeting to get input from the businesses and property owners who would be affected by

design guidelines, such as engineers and architects. We purposely held the meeting before putting any guidelines together. Our consultant made a general presentation with questions for the audience about design concepts that might be acceptable for Salem. We found that improving the character of the Route 28 strip was a shared goal of most of the participants, but there were concerns about adding costs to comply with new design guidelines and overregulating signs in particular.

Armed with feedback from this meeting, our consultant prepared a document using many photographs of local sites and

lines were adopted by the planning board in March 2011 as part of the town's site plan review regulations. The guidelines apply to new development as well as expansions or redevelopment of existing buildings and sites. They are applied to each development that requires site plan approval from the planning board, but can be waived if the board finds they are not applicable due to project size.

One critical decision was to adopt the guidelines as voluntary recommendations, not mandatory regulations. The planning board felt that the level of detail in the guidelines would take some time for everyone to

get used to, and they wanted to gauge the community's experience with them for a few years before making them mandatory.

LESSONS

Adopting design guidelines in a pro-development community with an existing commercial corridor is no easy task. In Salem, it helped to invite the development community to participate in the process at an early stage, not just to comment on a finished document. Keeping the public informed by posting draft versions of the guidelines on the town website and televising all discussions on them created a climate of openness. We were fortunate to hire an experienced consultant who was able to smoothly deal with concerns after having done so many times before in other communities. We were able to overcome any remaining objections by adopting the guidelines as voluntary. I also prepared a checklist to summarize the 90-page document in just a few pages, which made it easier to convey to property owners.

Several new projects have been reviewed under the design guidelines so far, and the experience has been positive. The planning board requested architectural upgrades and increased size of plantings in accordance with the guidelines. I expect that, as they are used more often, both the development community and the planning board will find the photographs in the guidelines to be beneficial and easy to use. Ultimately, I have no doubt this tool will help us better control the appearance of new development in Salem.

- ➔ Newer projects demonstrate what the town was trying to accomplish with design guidelines, including more attractive buildings and improved signage and landscaping.



- ➔ These before-and-after photos demonstrate the power of aesthetic improvements to change a retail strip.

buildings. We posted everything on the town website and, after several revisions and review by the planning board and myself, a final document was produced.

This document, *Design Guidelines for Salem, New Hampshire*, includes chapters on site planning, architecture, landscaping, lighting, and signage. It covers all new commercial (retail, office, and industrial) and multifamily residential development projects. Each chapter contains goals, objectives, and guidelines, which take the form of brief sentences with accompanying photographs. There are about 250 separate guidelines in 90 pages. The design guide-



Design Guidelines in Barnstable County, Massachusetts

By Sarah Korjeff

The Cape Cod Commission has used design guidelines since the early 1990s.

As a regional planning and regulatory agency—one of only two in Massachusetts—we identified the need for design guidelines both to direct development in the local communities and also to guide the design of projects undergoing review by our own agency.

DESIGNING THE FUTURE TO HONOR THE PAST

Designing the Future to Honor the Past: Design Guidelines for Cape Cod was our first effort. Because the Cape Cod Commission is a regional agency, we first developed design guidelines to apply to the region as a whole. That could be challenging given the variation in neighborhood character throughout the Cape's 15 towns, so we focused on the distinctive, traditional characteristics that were most common across those communities—the things that make the Cape unique and draw people there. Our initial publication included guidelines ranging from big-picture issues like site design down to more specific details like signage. We incorporated graphics as much as possible to help interpret the guidelines for the reader. The underlying principle of the publication was always to guide development to be consistent with the Cape's traditional character.

We developed *Designing the Future to Honor the Past* with help of a consultant and with numerous public meetings and opportunities for comment. The design guidelines

were adopted as a technical bulletin by the Cape Cod Commission and are used to illustrate how to comply with minimum performance standards in the commission's review of large-scale developments. In addition, the guidelines are used informally by several town planning boards, town planners, and architectural review boards in their site plan review and other local development reviews.

In one town, Yarmouth, the planning board formally adopted the design manual for guidance during project reviews in their commercial business district.

The manual, which won an Outstanding Planning Award from the Massachusetts Chapter of APA in 1995, has two key sections that make it more likely to be implemented. The first is a section titled "Case Studies," where we explored four typical development scenarios from the region: commercial strip redevelopment, compact residential development, historic village centers, and large-scale commercial development. We then applied the guidelines to each development scenario and illustrated how they could affect design there.

The strip redevelopment scenario was perhaps the most complicated, and it begins by acknowledging key problems with existing conditions: curb-cut conflicts, lack of consistent architecture, residential isolation, and visual clutter. The manual then attempts to address these issues in phases: first, laying the groundwork by creating a plan for the

area and amending zoning, then focusing on "Green Intervention" by consolidating curb cuts, installing sidewalks and street trees, and providing open space. The third phase introduces housing to the area through back-lot development and makes connections to surrounding residential neighborhoods. Finally, the fourth phase looks at infill construction along the street edge, as well as introducing public transportation and improving signage.

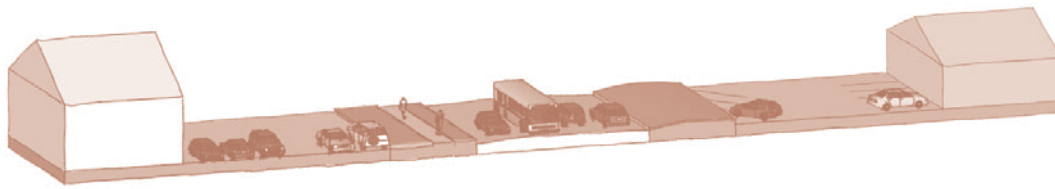
The second key section of the manual is titled "Making it Happen," which helps facilitate the changes discussed in the case studies. It acknowledges that zoning changes are not always easy to accomplish but recognizes they are a critical piece in guiding commercial zones to follow a more traditional surrounding context.

In strip commercial areas we have worked with towns individually and discussed those zoning changes that are needed to support the design guidelines—things like adjusting building setbacks, requiring building transparency, adopting mixed use zoning, and amending parking location requirements. But "Making it Happen" goes beyond zoning. It addresses the need to work with property owners to identify incentives that will guide development to desired locations and in the desired forms. It covers options like streamlined review processes, transfer of development rights, and density



Cape Cod Commission

② As shown in this sketch, lower roof heights on attached masses reduce the apparent scale of the building.



- ➡ This cross section shows existing development setbacks along Route 132 (above) and proposed changes following the design guidelines (below). In the future cross section, the taller building on the left remains where it is and parking is shielded by a 30-foot landscape buffer on the property. The shorter building on the right is moved closer to the street, and landscaping fills the front setback area.



bonuses. It also acknowledges the need for local investment in infrastructure improvements, whether they are public transit, pedestrian and bicycle facilities, or design assistance for facade improvements.

CONTEXTUAL DESIGN ON CAPE COD

After using *Designing the Future to Honor the Past* for 10 years, we found that historic districts and village centers were often subject to design review or design standards, but outlying areas in the region were not. Larger commercial zones, mostly located outside village centers, were seeing development of chain stores and other large commercial buildings. Towns were requesting assistance in how to review these structures, and it became apparent that further guidance was needed in the design of large-scale buildings. That led to development of the commission's second design manual, *Contextual Design on Cape Cod: Design Guidelines for Large Scale Development*, which won an Outstanding Planning Award from the Massachusetts Chapter of APA in 2009.

Contextual Design on Cape Cod focuses on large buildings, which the commission sees most in its development reviews and which arguably have the greatest visual impact on region. As with the first design manual, this was developed on a regional scale in an effort to provide a starting point for all towns and for the commission. Unlike the first manual, we developed it in-house with a group of architects that served as an advisory panel. In usage, it is very similar to the first manual. The commission has adopted it as another technical bulletin that provides guidance in how to comply with our regula-

tions, and we are encouraging communities to adopt it too. The Yarmouth Planning Board has formally adopted a slightly modified version as a minimum requirement in certain commercial districts, but other towns are using it informally to guide their review.

The importance of contextual design—guiding development to be consistent with the Cape's traditional character—is explained in this manual. It focuses on two main concerns: ways to site large buildings and ways to break down large building

masses into smaller elements that are more consistent with the region's traditional scale. In looking at siting strategies, the guidelines address two different scenarios—siting buildings in centers and siting buildings in outlying areas—acknowledging that different techniques are appropriate for each situation.

In strip development areas, it is necessary to determine whether an area should be treated as center or as an outlying area. If a strip area is adjacent to a village center



- ➡ This rendering of proposed development, looking north from the intersection of Route 28 and the Cape Cod Mall rear entrance, illustrates how the area could look with enhanced landscape buffers along Route 28 and a series of pedestrian-scale buildings fronting on a revised internal road/sidewalk network. The buildings are set close to the street and oriented to take advantage of visual access to the nearby ponds and green space.

or established neighborhood, it may be best to follow the historic patterns. Defining the street edge is perhaps one of the most important strategies, illustrated by moving buildings closer to the street, using landscape features to continue the building line, and using street trees to further define the street edge. Relocating buildings or entire parking lots may not be possible, so the guidelines offer alternative means of meeting the design goals through buffers and landscaping, always in an effort to maintain the traditional character of the region.

In the “Building Strategies” section, the manual explores various ways to break down large building masses, whether it is several smaller buildings grouped around a small courtyard or green or a series of smaller, attached massings. Articulating buildings by incorporating changes in building setback, height, roofline, and facades is a key element of this section. It also discusses the concept of bringing down the building edges with smaller attached masses that are more pedestrian oriented and scaled.

Both siting strategies and building strategies are illustrated with a combination of photographs and simple figures. Using graphics is critical to helping people understand the intent of the guidelines, and also to making the document user friendly.

APPLYING DESIGN GUIDELINES ALONG ROUTE 132

After producing the two regional design manuals, it has been a welcome challenge to apply these guidelines to specific areas in the region. The Route 132 commercial corridor in Hyannis, developed originally in the 1970s, is a good illustration of the challenges surrounding a commercial strip. The town and property owners want to change the character of the corridor to make it safer for pedestrians and other users and also to make it more attractive for businesses and their users.

We began our work by looking at the length of the corridor; cataloging its users; and studying building footprints, development patterns, and roadway characteristics. In doing that we were able to define discreet segments that could be recognized for their unique character. We defined the distinct areas on a map and created different goals and separate design guidelines for each area so the corridor would seem less like a long, consistent strip. Breaking it down into smaller parts also seemed to make unique development patterns more visible and potential solutions more manageable to implement.

A main feature of the Route 132 report was establishing a scale of building at the street frontage—essentially changing the relationship between the building and the street—either by moving parking to the rear of buildings or by establishing a wide, landscaped buffer. We found that offering two possible solutions is a useful tool that recognizes that it’s not always possible to relocate a building in the short term. Those options—moving the building forward or improving landscaping—are then illustrated with simple graphics.

Another main feature of the report was the focus on streetscape design. For each segment of the corridor we identified ways to define the road edge with consistent landscape treatments and pedestrian amenities, and presented them in illustrated design guidelines. Street trees and landscape buffers were proposed in some areas; consistent building setbacks in others. Hard-edge buffers such as fences or low walls were proposed in places where parking is visible or buildings are set too far back to create a sense of enclosure.

We also identified areas where development could be added—either to provide a pedestrian focus that connects existing activity areas to residential areas, to act as a shield for large parking lots, or to draw attention to underappreciated resources. As one example, we suggested additional pedestrian-scale buildings at the main access to one of the malls to provide linkage to a nearby residential neighborhood, to take advantage of hidden ponds, and to screen mall buildings and parking. We developed illustrations and graphics using SketchUp to help people understand how the area could look with these changes and to help sell the idea to various property owners and community officials.

FINAL THOUGHTS

In developing guidelines for specific areas, it’s important to recognize the potential shrinking retail market and also competition from other areas of the community that are involved in revitalization efforts—village centers, main streets, etc. Guidelines should make an effort to differentiate these areas, both in design and in activities or uses, in an effort to help them all succeed. But perhaps most important is to get guidelines out there. It is hard to influence change without them. To see the full design guidelines and reports discussed in this article, visit the Cape Cod Commission website at www.cape-codcommission.org.

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Cover image: Mashpee Commons, on Cape Cod, is built in the style of traditional New England town centers. It includes a mix of businesses and housing. Paul Blackmore/*Cape Cod Times*; design concept by Lisa Barton.

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HOW DOES YOUR COMMUNITY
GUIDE THE DESIGN OF
COMMERCIAL CORRIDORS?

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