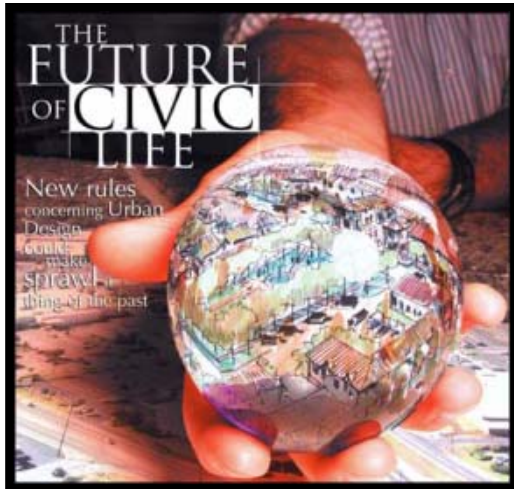


The Future of Civic Life: New Rules Concerning Urban Design could make Sprawl a Thing of the Past



“...’The whole point of the new zoning concept is to make it easy for developers to build the kind of neighborhoods that our citizens have said they want,’ ...” Tim Keane, Charleston City Planning

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Charleston, SC
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Feeling lonely and isolated?

Does facing rush hour traffic every day leave you feeling stressed out and irritable?

Are you getting a little bored with your digital cable, home theater, DVD player and Play Station?

Did you recently discover that the exotic beauty you have been courting online all these months is actually a pot-bellied retired trucker from Cleveland named Frank?

If you answered yes to one or more of these questions, you may need Prozac. On the other hand, you might just need a new zoning code.

Charleston City Council is poised to take an historic step this week when it votes on changes to the City’s zoning ordinance. If the new ordinance passes, Charleston will be on the road to reforming the land-use practices that have shaped the local landscape for the last fifty years. The new ordinance would allow the creation of dense, multi-use, pedestrian-oriented villages at strategic sites throughout the city. The new zoning plan’s backers hope that these villages will help reduce traffic, conserve rural land and create focal points for community life in the city’s more suburban neighborhoods.

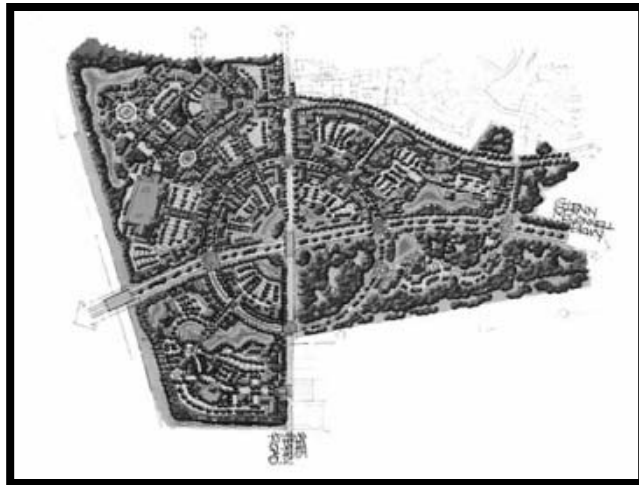
Many issues that have come before the City Council are more highly publicized and contentious. The ban on smoking in public places that will be up for a vote at the same meeting seems to have stirred far more emotion. Yet few matters the City Council will consider this year have the potential to so radically affect our civic destiny. The future of the city is a stake. Whether Charleston will be a small island of historic buildings in a vast sea of sprawl or whether we can build new neighborhoods as gracious as our older areas hinges on the fate of the gathering place initiative.

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The “gathering places” proposal, as it is sometimes known, would create two new optional zoning districts: a “new neighborhoods” district for previously undeveloped sites and a “gathering place” district at redevelopment sites. In terms of the kind of environments they are designed to achieve, the new districts are hardly distinguishable.

For the sake of convenience I will refer to both as “gathering places,” a term first suggested by a citizen at a public planning workshop. After weighing some decidedly unsexy alternatives like “urban nodes,” the gathering places name stuck. It has a warm nostalgic ring obviously calculated to appear friendly and unthreatening to a public prone to panic at the first mention of words like “urban” or “density.” However, gathering places has the virtue of describing how advocates hope these areas will function in two straightforward words that everyone can understand.



The Planning Commission voted overwhelmingly to recommend adoption of the new districts at its May 21st meeting. But the enthusiasm was not unanimous. Commission member Barbara Ellison echoes the comments she made when she cast the lone dissenting vote at that meeting: “Gathering Places is a frothy, feel good term. I think it sounds vague and nostalgic because it is. The fact is that most people depend on their cars, and it’s going to be hard to change that. I don’t believe most people really need more places to gather. Most people are too busy with their jobs, their families and homes to have the time to gather much anymore. People spend more of the free time they do have watching television and surfing on the internet.”

“If you build it, they may not come.” she suggested ominously.

Charleston City Planning Director Tim Keane is much more optimistic. On the night of the Planning Commission meeting, he beamed with satisfaction. The plan his office had spent years developing was finally on its way to City Council. “From a planning perspective, this is as big as it gets,” he said. He predicted that if passed, the gathering places would become a central focus of the city’s planning and economic development agenda for at least the next decade.

Throwing out the Old Rules

What makes the new proposal so radical is its rejection of the basic assumption that has governed zoning rules since their birth in the early 20th century. The guiding idea of American zoning laws has always been separating uses. The big messy life of the American city would be scientifically dissected, and parts identified and each consigned to its own plot of ground. Housing, factories, offices and stores would cease to rub shoulders along crowded pedestrian streets. Each kind of endeavor was now given its own part of the city, which would later be described as a “pod.” From the beginning the segregation of uses was dependent on the automobile, which was soon to become absolutely necessary if you wanted to get from one pod to another.

To be fair, it is hard nowadays to imagine the stinking chaotic spectacle of the early industrial city. Factory smokestacks belched thick black smoke that created a perpetual twilight in surrounding neighborhoods and torrents of steaming fresh cow's blood ran through the gutters down the street from the local slaughterhouse. Movie fans splattered with gore at screenings of Martin Scorsese's urban epic *Gangs of New York* might be surprised to learn that the film's gruesome portrayal of city life rarely strayed far from a base in historical fact.

Today, however the rationale for separating uses into detached pods seems increasingly outdated. Its hard to see how living close by a coffee shop or a law office would degrade most people's quality of life. Even most small industrial enterprises might fit in comfortably in many neighborhoods, though the new rules do not go quite that far. Otherwise, the new zoning system proposed for the gathering place districts pretty much throws the whole idea of segregating uses out the window.

In its place the ordinance substitutes a new system known as "form-based zoning." Essentially, this means regulating the size, shape and organization of streets and buildings to create a walkable, transit-friendly collection of interconnected streets. The aim is to foster the development of a dense mix of housing and businesses. In the last decade a number of municipalities have adopted form-based zoning districts, from the Washington, DC suburb of Arlington Virginia to the quaint mountain town of Waynesville, North Carolina.

Charleston's gathering place rules require that buildings be built to the edge of wide sidewalks and mandate shady street trees. On-street parking is required, while off-street parking is relegated to the rear of buildings. The rules specify no minimum lot sizes, no restrictions on density and no minimum parking requirements. They do require that buildings be more than one story along the street front and impose minimum frontage requirements to create a continuous street wall. Cul de sacs are discouraged in favor of grid-like street systems that disperse traffic away from bottlenecks.

If a gathering place district is larger than ten acres, 10% of the total area must be set aside for usable public spaces such as neighborhood greens, plazas and squares. Commercial corridor Design review, already in place in many areas, would review architectural and site plans to insure that individual buildings exhibit good urban design.

"If the ordinance is adopted," Keane says, "the neighborhood district would be a by-right option that would have immediate application throughout the city. We could apply it to newly annexed areas as a condition of annexation. The gathering place district would need to go through another step, which would be its application to specific properties. There would be public hearings and other opportunities for public input as part of that process."

Sites the City is considering for gathering places include Avondale Point in the Ashley Bridge District on Highway 17, the intersection of Folly Road and Maybank Highway at the northern tip of James Island, the intersection of Bee's Ferry Road and the Glenn McConnell Parkway where a new super Walmart is planned, Upper King Street between Huger and Romney Streets in the vicinity of Rivers Middle School and the King's Plaza shopping center, and the nearly empty Ashley Landing Shopping Center at the intersection of Sam Rittenberg Boulevard and Old Town Road.

According to Keane, the gathering place idea "grew out of the new city plan that the Council adopted in 2000. We did a substantial survey of to find out what kinds of neighborhoods Charleston citizens wanted. We had about 4,000 people respond. The vast majority of people felt that a good neighborhood was one that was walkable and had a mix of uses and housing options. Regardless of

where people actually lived, most people's whole idea of a 'neighborhood' was about diverse communities not housing subdivisions."

"As we worked on the plan, we began to talk about the need to restore old main streets like the Avondale Point area on Highway 17 and Riverland Terrace and the possibilities for creating new ones, particularly in the suburbs. We saw potential in some areas that we had overlooked before. For example, the South Windermere Shopping Center is not really an old main street, but it is a pleasantly scaled older shopping center that has revived. We wanted to protect areas that have worked well and maintained some character and sense of place. That inspired us to begin thinking of ways to create new areas that would give West Ashley, James Island and Johns Island places of distinction that residents could be proud of."

"Of course, we also wanted new areas would also serve a function: places to gather, places that could support a transit stop. We wanted to improve transportation in the suburbs by connecting neighborhoods and building the kind of interconnected street network that is going to be necessary to solve some of the traffic problems."

The ideas animating the gathering place initiative have already begun shaping City's planning efforts. Planners have been designing schemes for the West Ashley Circle gathering place at Bee's Ferry and Glenn McConnell for several years. In June of 2002, planners organized a public planning process to involve neighbors in the design of the proposed McCleod Village gathering place at Folly Road and Maybank. For a week, James Island residents mixed it up with city staff and consultants in the nearly abandoned Cross Creek shopping center trying to envision a way to revitalize the area. The plans they came up with included a traffic circle to ease congestion at the infamously panic-inducing intersection and a Main Street ambience in place of the empty parking lots. They also tried to explore ways in which the Village they were creating on shreds of drafting paper and napkins from McDonald's might develop a symbiotic relationship with the adjacent McCleod Plantation, now owned by the Historic Charleston Foundation.

In Search of Community

What, you may asking by now, does all this have to do with my dismal social life, occasional bouts of road rage and jaded appetite for the latest in multimedia gadgetry?

Planning Commissioner Ellison diagnosed the problem, even if she isn't fond of the cure. In *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Harvard Political Science professor Robert D. Putnam paints much the same picture of contemporary society. Inventorying a vast array of statistics about American social habits, he found that we have become increasingly disconnected. "Television, two-career families, suburban sprawl, generational changes in values-- these and other changes in American society have meant that fewer and fewer of us find that the League of Women Voters, or the United Way, or the Shriners, or the monthly bridge club, or even a Sunday picnic with friends fits the way we have come to live," he writes.

If bowling leagues and bridge clubs seem like leisure-time luxuries that society might reasonably get along without, Putnam connects the waning of our sociable instincts to the falling levels of volunteerism, civic engagement and voter turnout that threaten to undermine the foundations of American democracy. "Our growing social-capital deficit threatens educational performance, safe neighborhoods, equitable tax collection, democratic responsiveness, everyday honesty, and even our health and happiness."

Although some people like to blame television, I would argue that the de-evolution of the American city into a far-flung tangle of automobile-based sprawl is the greater culprit. For most of the last half century, bulldozers and builders have swarmed into the countryside around every American city, cranking out subdivisions the way Henry Ford turned out cars.

The heyday of mass production brought material plenty but a great loss of variety. The consumer was allowed choose from a very limited range of options: three television networks, a Ford or Chevy, Coke or Pepsi, "taste's great" or "less filling." Homebuyers were offered ranch homes, cape cod cottages and split levels tricked up in their choice of Tudor, Spanish hacienda or Colonial Revival details. If they wanted to venture out into the world, they could wheel right up to the door at a strip center or leave their car behind in an enormous asphalt parking lot to enjoy the air-conditioned delights of an enclosed shopping mall.

As with many ideas that are outliving their usefulness, the segregation of land uses was refined into ever more narrow niches. Residents of single-family homes came to regard residents of apartments and condominiums as undesirables. Moreover, the owner of a \$265,000 house could not be expected to endure a \$235,000 house next door. Isolated from the friendly round of community life, retailers increasingly relied on franchising and television advertising rather than personal relationships.

In the new automobile ecosystem, retailers evolved like dinosaurs from superstores into megastores. The holy grail of retail became the "category killer," a store so dominant in one area of consumer goods that it would literally destroy all competition and monopolize customers within its reach. Every time they shed their skin and headed for greener pastures farther out in the suburbs, they left behind vacant big-box stores that were often too large for other users. Take a drive down Folly Road. You can count the hulking skeletons of outdated superstores, check out the vacant K-Mart or enjoy an unobstructed vista of the vast treeless expanse of parking lot from the windows of the Sunspot Café.

It didn't take long before a vague sense of dissatisfaction set in. Everyone might like to pal around with Ronald McDonald, but sitting in the drive-through waiting for some Happy Meals proved a less sociable experience. Walmart, the T-Rex of chain retailers, tried to personalize its image by hiring elderly greeters to accost shoppers as they enter the store, an experience sometimes as creepy as encountering a talking robot face on an ATM machine.

Bad omens began to accumulate that seemed plausibly related to the sprawling isolation of modern cities. Teenage suicide skyrocketed across the suburbs. Drunk driving increased. Taxes and insurance spiraled upward. Attendance at PTA meetings grew sparse. Americans earned the distinction of the "fattest" people on earth. Disinvestment, poverty, drug addiction and crime made the term "inner city" a scary one for Americans who watched the carnage on the nightly news and vowed to avoid downtown like the plague.

And then there were the steadily worsening traffic jams that plagued suburban areas everywhere. Nothing gets Americans' attention faster than being stuck in traffic. Despite pouring billions upon billions into road widening schemes and other transportation improvements, commute times soared and automobile-related air pollution thickened. The once bucolic city of Charlotte, NC now regularly announces bad air days when it is deemed unsafe to breathe too much of the poisonous atmosphere.

Zoning policies in cities across the country not only abetted this process, but made it practically inevitable. Indeed, zoning laws soon made it illegal to build anything but sprawl, even in areas that had formerly been rich pedestrian environments. Planner Keane explains, "People think that current development is the result of the free market, which is absolutely wrong. Everything that happens is

because of a regulation that exists. You are told how many parking spaces you must have, the setback of the building, what kind of signage you can have... Through our codes we are telling people what to build, and we are getting exactly what we asked for, even if its not what we really want."

A New Vision

"The whole point of the new zoning concept is to make it easy for developers to build the kind of neighborhoods that our citizens have said they want," Keane says. "Of course, not everyone wants the same thing. Gathering places aren't appropriate everywhere. Some people want to be in a more urban environment and some people like a more rural environment. The problem is that our rules have required just about everything to be suburban. We are trying to give people more choices."

While Keane admits that traffic jams will never go away entirely, he sees gathering places as a way to help ease congestion. "For one thing, we will give people the option to not have to get in their car for some trips. Even people who like to walk are going to drive occasionally. But we strongly believe that some people want to walk to some things some of the time. And that's very hard for most people in the suburbs to do now."

Keane points out that little accomplishments can add up in a big way. "Right now the average single family home in America generates about ten car trips a day. If we can reduce those ten trips to eight or nine on the local level, we will have accomplished something significant. Let's use Avondale Point as an example. For the sake of convenience, let's say are just ten businesses in the area. If just twelve people a week walked to each of those businesses, you would have 480 car trips off the road each month. By the end of the year, you'd have taken 5,760 car trips off of Highway 17."

CARTA Chairman Patterson Smith strongly favors the gathering places plan, partly because it meshes so well with his agency's goals. "Our research tells us that people will walk about a quarter of a mile to get to a transit stop. If you can't make it convenient for people, they will always drive instead. You have to have a certain amount of density in some areas for public transit to work."

Smith points out that the business district at Avondale Point originally developed around the terminus of the old trolley line. Partly because they grew up around transit, neighborhoods like Avondale and Byrnes Downs have a lot of the features planners want to emulate for new gathering places. "Development and transportation planning have always gone hand in hand," he says.

Hollis Mays, a postal service employee and community leader who lives near the proposed McCleod Village on James Island, was happy to play a role in the planning a more pedestrian-friendly future for her neighborhood. She points out that auto-dependent sprawl affects some people more than others. "We have a lot of active senior citizens in our neighborhood, and they would love to be able to walk to a café and get together. I used to work as a caregiver for elderly people. I have seen how hard it is for many people when they lose the ability to drive. They become trapped in their own homes. "

When the Time Comes

While cocooning and cyberspace seem to be around to stay, the winds of change seem to have shifted decisively in favor of traditional neighborhoods and shopping districts. The New Urbanism movement returned the pedestrian to a central role in the design of new mixed-use developments. Local New Urban neighborhoods such as I'On and Daniel Island have been wildly successful, drawing praise from egg-headed planning gurus, profit-minded builders and local homebuyers alike. The

sidewalks of pedestrian-friendly downtown Charleston are now chocked with sweaty hordes of locals and tourists almost every day of the week.

Such enormous popularity has its downsides. Downtown home prices and commercial rents have become so expensive that only the wealthiest can afford to live there. The problem has gotten bad enough to be labeled an affordable housing “crisis.” Likewise, prices at I’On and Daniel Island have shot up as eager buyers have flocked in. Developer John Knott and the City of North Charleston have followed up with the ambitious Noisette project, which threatens to give the local poster child for urban sprawl an urbane pedestrian-oriented core.

Peninsular Charleston is fortunate to have that amenity already, although other parts of the city have not been so fortunate. Writing in favor of the gathering places initiative on behalf of the South Carolina Coastal Conservation League, Megan Terebus declares that “the City has made great strides in protecting the historic character and retaining the economic vitality of the peninsula of Charleston. The areas West of the Ashley and on James and Johns Islands are no less important and merit the same planning, great care and attention to detail.” National trends suggest the time might be right to give parts of West Ashley, James Island and Johns Island focal points of their own.

Ever on the lookout for the next big thing, trend watchers have discovered a vigorous new lifestyle species they have christened “local area nesting.” By this they mean that people are doing more things in their own neighborhoods, like meeting a few friends at the local cafe or corner bar. RoperASW, a consumer research and marketing firm, coined the “local area nesting” concept. It was quickly picked up and bandied about by dozens of national media outlets including *the Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post* and CNN. My own modest proposal is that we jump on the bandwagon and replace the gathering places term with “local area nests” at once.

What has made Charleston so loved and so celebrated by generation after generation is the vitality and refinement of its human-scaled streets, its fine buildings and graceful parks. Our fair city has given birth to a few artists and writers of distinction, as well as the deadliest war in American history, but our greatest contribution has been as an example of an urban place that has always managed to be dignified and sensuous, exciting and laid back all at once.

Amid the rough and tumble of daily life, it can be easy to take the magic of the places we inhabit for granted. But it is a powerful force. It is strong enough to lure throngs of visitors, legions of well-heeled retirees in search of a trophy home and young professionals willing to accept chronic underemployment just for the privilege of living here. At this very minute, hundreds of frustrated commuters inching along on snarled eight-lane highways in Atlanta and Charlotte are daydreaming fondly about moving to Charleston. Over the next two decades, tens of thousands of them will actually show up. They will have to fit in somewhere. Each new resident can add one more SUV to our own overburdened roads or one more pair of feet to a lively pedestrian zone. Keep ‘em off the road.