

## Planning Information Sheet: Building Social Capital with Comprehensive Planning and Ordinances



Metropolitan Design Center

Version 1.2

DESIGN FOR HEALTH is a collaboration between the University of Minnesota and Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota that serves to bridge the gap between the emerging research base on community design and healthy living with the every-day realities of local government planning..

**Design for Health**  
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## Overview

Design for Health's Planning Information Sheets series provides planners with useful information about opportunities to address important health issues through the comprehensive planning process and plan implementation. The series addresses a range of health issues that are relevant to many communities and can be efficiently and effectively integrated into local plans and policies. This second information sheet provides insights for planners in understanding how social capital relates to the built environment and points to innovative approaches to planning for social capital.



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Different kinds of social capital are fostered by different locations. Central cities, such as St. Paul, Minnesota, tend to have high levels of political participation

## Key Points

- Social capital is difficult to measure and difficult to define. Studies show that different measures of social capital (e.g. increased levels of trust, political participation, knowing one's neighborhoods, participating in a protest, voting in elections, etc) are supported by different built environments (Williamson 2004). As such, different kinds of environments can facilitate social capital. For example, people in low density areas and areas with high levels of home ownership tend to be more neighborly (e.g. increased levels of trust) while people in dense areas with pedestrian infrastructure tend to be more engaged in political participation (Williamson 2004; Leyden 2003).
- Key issue areas that planners can consider as they begin to address social capital through the planning process include promoting mixed-use development, creating pedestrian-oriented and transit-oriented environments, and facilitating housing options. It should be noted that several different kinds of environments facilitate social capital and so this Information Sheet focuses on increasing options.
- Practical methods to integrate these approaches into comprehensive plans, address typical plan elements such as population, economic, land use, community facilities, transportation, housing, and natural resources (Kelly and Becker 2000). Specific strategies for

attempting to increase one measure of social capital, namely political participation, includes incorporating non-traditional elements such as a downtown element focused on mixed-use neighborhood scale development, addressing pedestrians in transportation elements, and designating transit station areas on the future land use map.

- An important issue in social capital is collecting background information: analyzing current and future conditions, and stating goals and policies. Methods used have included conducting a pedestrian needs assessment, evaluating street conditions, and identifying opportunities for mixed-use development.
- Several strategies are available for integrating social capital considerations into land development regulations. Here we focus on types of environments that are less well represented in the Twin Cities, including implementing transit-oriented development (TOD) overlay districts, specifying design guidelines for pedestrian-oriented planning, and creating mixed-use zoning districts to encourage multiple uses in neighborhoods, downtowns, and other areas of a community.

## Understanding Social Capital

Among the health issues addressed in the *Planning Information Sheets* series, social capital is one of the most complex but also one of the most interesting issues, as it relates to many of the decisions that communities make in the planning process.\* Lack of social capital—social networks-like poor air quality, is not a health outcome but rather a determinant of health, something that can improve or undermine mental and physical health. Before turning to recommended approaches for integrating social capital considerations into local plans and ordinances, it is important to provide some more detail about how social capital relates to health and the built environment. There are many different ways to encourage different kinds of social capital through the built environment. In this Information Sheet, we focus mostly on adding variety to typically low-density auto-oriented areas. We focus on these themes because most of the communities that we are working with are interested in these kinds of environments because they are underrepresented in their municipalities.

**Mixed-use Development:** Previous research shows that living in a pedestrian friendly environment that facilitates access to a range of land uses contributes to social capital, which is defined as whether people know their neighbors, their political participation, their trust in other people, and their social engagement (Leyden 2003). It is assumed that having access to a diverse range of facilities and services within close proximity and reachable without an automobile, increases the likelihood of interaction. Mixed-use environments may be vertically integrated with commercial or office at the street level and residential above, or may simply include a mix of uses spread throughout a neighborhood, town center, or corridor.

**Transit-Oriented Environments and Density:** In addition to pedestrian-oriented environments, neighborhoods or communities with transit access also are associated higher levels of social capital, measured in the research as political participation (Williamson 2004). This finding may be associated with the availability of an alternative transportation mode, which reduces

the amount of time spent commuting alone by automobile – an activity shown to reduce trust – an important aspect of social capital (Williamson 2004). The research does not differentiate among transit types and there is no clear direction as to how close transit must be to residential or employment uses. It could also be that people who choose to live near transit have a preference for collective activities. However the finding is important to communities considering promoting transit-oriented development or promoting higher densities to make transit service more viable.

**Pedestrian-Oriented Environments:** Mixed-use and other environments also have shown to be associated with higher levels of social capital defined as political participation or sense of community (Williamson 2004, Lund 2002). If one perceives his or her neighborhood or community to be walkable, a place where walking is possible and pleasant, that individual is likely to have a greater sense of community in terms of similarities between respondent and others in the neighborhood, relationships and interaction with neighbors, and commitment to the neighborhood (Lund 2002). In Lund's (2002) study, perceived walkability among residents was measured based on availability of pedestrian amenities such as sidewalks and shade trees, seeing neighborhoods and interesting homes, amount of auto traffic, and safety. Walkability also was objectively measured based on lot sizes, setbacks, housing mix, and connectivity (Lund 2002). While this Information Sheet deals briefly with this issue, more detail can be found in the DFH Safety Information Sheet in this series.

Two additional issue areas, homeownership and density, also appear to be related to social capital but in complex ways. While this information sheet does not include specific methods to address these issues through comprehensive planning and plan implementation, we have provided a brief discussion of them to inform communities as they consider the broad range of approaches to increasing social capital and how they might relate to other aspects of health.



**Homeownership and Housing Choices:** Research has indicated a relationship between various measures of social capital and home ownership (Brisson and Usher 2005, Williamson 2004). Individual homeowners and neighborhoods or communities with higher levels of ownership housing were shown to have higher levels of social capital based on residents' responses to number of questions related to how close-knit the neighborhood is, willingness of neighbors to help each other, level of conflict among neighbors, similarity in values among neighbors, and level of trust in neighbors. While this finding is compelling, it is important to consider that this finding is associated with just one aspect of health. Further, concerns about equity suggest that planners and local decision-makers should think carefully about strategies to increase ownership. An additional finding from the social capital literature is that having children under the age of six in the household increases social capital (Lund 2002). Recognizing that it may be difficult for new families to afford ownership housing, there may be a need to provide a mix of housing options. In addition, it is clear that some of the other factors shown to be associated with social capital, including mixed-use and pedestrian or transit-oriented environments might require a mix of housing types to be attractive, marketable, and economically viable.

**Density:** The evidence related to the effect of residential densities on social capital is mixed. Depending on how social capital is measured, evidence shows that both low and high densities may be associated with social capital (Glaeser and Sacerdote 2000, Williamson 2004). Thus, communities might consider other factors beyond social capital when making decisions about density such as fiscal impacts, environmental impacts, and equity.

## Planning for Social Capital

This section outlines approaches that communities can use to plan for and implement ordinances to increase social capital. We focus specifically on mixed-use development and pedestrian and transit oriented communities, all of which have been shown to have a positive relationship to social capital via political

participation, voting in elections, contacting public officials, etc.

## Facilitating Mixed-use Development

Creating an environment in which residents or visitors can easily access a range of uses can contribute to social capital. Mixed-use development is often characterized as more walkable, more convenient, and more vibrant (Grant 2002).

One approach to integrating mixed-use into a comprehensive plan is to use an element focused on promoting mixed-use, often along with other goals such as pedestrian connectivity, historic preservation, and urban design. A useful example comes from Des Moines, Washington, a suburban community in the Seattle metropolitan area. The Des Moines Comprehensive Plan includes a Downtown Neighborhood Element, which provides a number of goals intended to create a mixed-use environment including:

To ensure that Downtown Des Moines will be:

- The civic and cultural center for the City.
- Inviting to area workers, residents, shoppers, and visitors.
- Characterized by businesses serving the greater Des Moines Community.
- Aesthetically pleasing.
- Pedestrian-friendly.
- A residential as well as a commercial neighborhood.
- A downtown that takes advantage of its waterfront location.
- A neighborhood with numerous opportunities for passive outdoor recreation.
- An area with views of Puget Sound and the Olympic Mountains.
- A commercial district where redevelopment and the introduction of new businesses is encouraged when such activities complement and implement adopted goals and policies

Source: City of Des Moines 2006

Mixed-use environments might also be facilitated through the establishment of a mixed-use land use category. In the case of Newport Beach, California, the City has established multiple

categories of mixed use including Mixed Use Vertical, Mixed Use Horizontal, and Mixed Use Water Related. To illustrate the variation in intent of the three categories, the definitions are provided below:

**Mixed Use Vertical (MU-V).** The MU-V designation is intended to provide for the development of properties for (1) mixed-use structures that vertically integrate housing with retail uses, where the ground floor shall be restricted to retail and other pedestrian-active uses along with the street frontage and/or the upper floors used for residential units, or (b) structures containing nonresidential uses including retail, office, restaurant, and similar uses. For mixed use structures, commercial uses characterized by noise, vibration, odors, or other activities that would adversely impact on-site residential units are prohibited.

**Mixed Use Horizontal (MU-H).** The MU-H designation is intended to provide for the development of areas for a horizontally distributed mix of uses, which may include general or neighborhood commercial, commercial offices, multi-family residential, visitor-serving and marine-related uses, and/or buildings that vertically integrate residential with commercial uses.

**Mixed Use Water Related (MU-W).** The MU-W designation is intended to provide for commercial development on or near the bay in a manner that will encourage the continuation of coastal-development and coastal-related uses in accordance with the Recreational and Marine Commercial designation, as well as allow for the integrated development of residential (City of Newport Beach 2006).



Social interaction occurs in many places including places such as this one

Each of these categories also has sub-categories that provide more specific details about the types of uses allowed. For example, one of the vertical mixed use categories allows for only retail on the first floor, while the other allows for office uses (City of Newport Beach 2006). This level of detail is not often provided relative to land use categories, but this approach has the advantage of providing a clear intent related to the density and intensity of development and the mix of particular uses on an individual site a district. Integrating goals, policies, and/or objectives related to mixed use is another approach that a community might take. Madison, Wisconsin provides an example with its objective of creating “compact, mixed-use activity (“town”) centers as “urban” alternatives to conventional suburban style, single-use, low-density office and research parks” (City of Madison 2006). The plan includes a number of policies to support this objective including but not limited to:

- Prepare detailed neighborhood development plans that include location criteria and design standards for mixed-use activity centers.
- Adopt land development regulations that foster the development of compact, mixed-use town centers as “urban” alternatives to the conventional suburban style office and research park type employment center.
- Mixed-use areas should be uniquely designed, easily discernible urban places. These areas should function as primary neighborhood, community or regional activity centers (with the scale of the development determined by City-adopted plans) and act as important destinations for living, working, shopping, entertainment and recreation.
- Each new mixed-use development shall contain a strategic mix of uses (vertical mixed-use in buildings and horizontal mixed-use on the ground), including residential, retail, office, service, civic and open space.
- Scale streets and blocks in mixed-use areas to the needs of pedestrians. Strongly discourage superblocks (i.e. large blocks where buildings are spread out from each other in a low-density manner).
- Encourage structured or underground parking in mixed-use town centers and in conventional commercial development

Source: City of Madison 2006

Finally, in terms of plan implementation, communities might approach the promotion of mixed-use in a number of ways. One approach, similar to Newport Beach's use of multiple mixed-use land use categories, is to develop mixed-use zoning categories. The City of Bloomington, Minnesota, is a large suburb of over 80,000 people located just south of Minneapolis. The community might be characterized as typically suburban, though it is making efforts to promote mixed-use in its neighborhoods, near its new light rail station, and even adjacent to the freeway. The City has established three new zoning categories intended to promote mixed-use development including the Neighborhood Commercial Center District, High Intensity Mixed Use with Residential District, and Freeway Mixed-Use District. The statements of intent for each district are provided on the following column:

***Neighborhood Commercial Center (B-4) District.***

The Neighborhood Commercial Center District is designed to provide for neighborhood scale commercial and residential mixed uses configured in a pedestrian friendly manner. The B-4 District provisions are intended to:

1. Promote an attractive streetscape through building placement and design;
2. Restrict incompatible uses including gas stations, auto repair and car washes;
3. Ensure development is easily accessible by foot or bicycle;
4. Reduce the visual impact of parked vehicles by requiring the placement of vehicle parking areas to the side or rear of buildings;
5. Create opportunities for residential uses when mixed with commercial uses; and
6. Promote a balance of retail, service, dining, medical office and residential uses which serve and complement surrounding neighborhoods (City of Bloomington 2006b).

***High Intensity Mixed Use with Residential (HX-R) District.*** It is the purpose of this district to provide for high intensity employment-oriented, tourist-oriented and residential uses in areas close to frequent transit service. The provisions of this district are intended to:

1. Promote high intensity development;
2. Avoid under-utilization of the small supply of land in Bloomington that lies within one half mile of high frequency mass transit service;
3. Require the creation of a significant high density residential node to diversify housing options available in Bloomington and create a live-work-recreation environment;
4. Reduce vehicle trips and vehicle miles traveled relative to the same level of development in other areas by allowing residences in close proximity to employment and services, by allowing intense development in close proximity to high frequency transit service, and by encouraging multiple-purpose trips, walking trips, carpool trips and transit trips;
5. Reduce overall costs and impacts of parking by making shared parking feasible where peak parking demand times vary among uses;
6. Maximize return on public utility and transportation infrastructure investments by requiring high intensity development;
7. More efficiently use public and private infrastructure by taking advantage of peak demand time variables in for infrastructure (roads, transit, sewer, water, electricity, phone) among land uses. By becoming a source of trip origins as well as destinations, roadway and transit systems can be used in a more efficient bi-directional manner;
8. Ensure that residential development is compatible with the surrounding noise levels;
9. Provide a pedestrian oriented environment; and
10. Provide floor area ratio bonuses to encourage development characteristics that advance citywide and district specific objectives, including accessory retail and service uses, below grade parking, parks or plazas, affordable housing, public art and sustainable design (City of Bloomington 2006a).



**Freeway Mixed Use (C-5) District.** The Freeway Mixed Use (C-5) District is designed to provide for high intensity mixed residential and commercial land uses in locations where excellent, accessible transit service is anticipated to be available. The C-5 District is intended to:

1. Encourage the incorporation of high-density residential uses;
2. Promote an attractive streetscape through building placement and design;
3. Restrict incompatible uses including gas stations, auto repair and car washes; and
4. Reduce the visual impact of parked vehicles by requiring the placement of vehicle parking areas to the side or rear of buildings (City of Bloomington (2006b)).

As illustrated here, communities have many options for promoting social capital through the provision of mixed-use developments, neighborhoods, and communities.



Mixed use development can be the result of specific planning processes. This example is of new development at Excelsior and Grand in St. Louis Park, Minnesota

## Creating Transit-oriented Environments

There a number of planning and implementation approaches that communities can use to facilitate the creation of transit-oriented environments. Most communities address transit as part of the transportation element of chapter of their comprehensive plans. One approach is to use the comprehensive plan to identify areas appropriate for transit-oriented development (TOD). City of

Minneapolis' Comprehensive Plan does this by establishing policies associated with Transit Station Areas (TSAs) and designating these areas on the Land Use Policy Map. A policy framework for the TSAs is provided through a discussion of their characteristics including:

- TSAs will be the subject of established master plans that identify and/or prioritize areas for change (and preservation), as well as specific goals and objectives for redevelopment, public infrastructure, density and urban design.
- TSAs are areas approximately one-half mile in radius from transit stations, reflecting an understanding that most walking trips to and from transit stations are ten minutes or less in duration. Density, urban design, and public infrastructure is, therefore, especially critical in these areas. The actual size of this area is influenced by directness of routes, physical barriers, and the potential of those barriers to be bridged.
- Potential TSA densities and/or redevelopment opportunities are generally highest within 1/4 mile of the transit station, but are also dependent upon factors such as existing neighborhood character and land cost and availability.
- TSA development is designed with the pedestrian, bicyclist and/or transit user in mind.
- TSA development serves individuals who are more likely to use transit (e.g. residents of multi-family housing and office and retail workers)
- TSA development includes small-scale retail services that are neighborhood in scale and from which pedestrians, bicyclists, and/or transit riders are likely to benefit (e.g. coffee shop, day care, dry cleaners, small-scale grocery, flower shop).

Source: City of Minneapolis 2002

The plan goes on to list over 20 implementation steps related to higher densities, mixed-use development, facilitating bicycle and pedestrian access, connections to bus service, and parking (City of Minneapolis 2002).



Because transit planning is often coordinated with counties, regional planning agencies, and / or metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), communities might take a collaborative planning approach to facilitating the creation of transit-oriented development. For example, the City of Longmont, Colorado, a suburban community of 80,000 northwest of Denver, coordinated with the Regional Transportation District (RTD) in preparing a feasibility study of rail and potential station areas. The analysis considered land use patterns around proposed sites, ridership projections, and market analysis for TOD. In addition to data collection, the analysis also was informed by public input gathered through an advisory committee, interviews, public meetings, planning workshops, and a website (City of Longmont 2005).

Finally, in terms of implementing planning efforts related to creating transit-oriented environments, communities have a number of options. One opportunity, often available without changes in existing development regulations, is the use of the planned unit development (PUD) process (Greenberg 2004). PUDs allow flexibility in dealing with large sites and multiple parcels, and in promoting a broader set of community goals such as those related to TOD.

Another typical approach is the use of an overlay zone. The Massachusetts Smart Growth Toolkit includes a model TOD overlay ordinance. The stated purposes of the overlay district, for inclusion in a community's zoning ordinance include:

1. Encourage a mix of moderate and high density development within walking distance of transit stations to increase transit ridership;
2. Create a pedestrian-friendly environment to encourage walking, bicycling and transit use;
3. Provide an alternative to traditional development by emphasizing mixed use, pedestrian oriented development;
4. Create a neighborhood identity that promotes pedestrian activity, safety and livability;
5. Encourage building reuse and infill to create higher densities;
6. Reduce auto dependency and roadway congestion by locating multiple destinations and trip purposes within walking distance of one another; and
7. Provide a range of housing options for people of different income levels and at different stages of life

Source: State of Massachusetts 2006



Design for transit needs to balance the requirements of people and vehicles, as in this case in Amsterdam, Netherlands. Transit is also addressed in the issue sheet on accessibility.

The district lists allowed, prohibited, and conditional uses. To create a more transit friendly environment, the district prohibits a number of uses including auto oriented uses (e.g. car washes, auto sales, gasoline sales), strip commercial development, self storage facilities, low density development (under seven units per acre), retail uses (except grocery stores) over 10,000 square feet unless part of a mixed-use development, and commercial parking facilities (State of Massachusetts 2006).

## Promoting Pedestrian-Oriented Environments

As described above, mixed-use development often has a significant emphasis on walkability. In addition to creating mixed-use environments, there are number of other planning and policy approaches that communities can undertake to promote pedestrian-oriented environments and the social capital outcomes that are associated with them.

There are numerous opportunities to address pedestrians and walkability in the comprehensive planning process. As part of the inventory and analysis process, communities often gather information about pedestrian activity and facilities, integrate into comprehensive plans as elements, and implement through pedestrian overlay zones and design guidelines. For more information about this kind of planning, see the Safety Issues Sheet.

## Final Thoughts

The examples provided above are helpful as communities begin to think about how to improve social capital, a key aspect of health that can be influenced by the built environment. It is important to recognize that local conditions should be considered in determining plan content and identifying regulatory tools. Each of the examples summarized here can be modified and tailored to the local development pattern, market, access to capital facilities, political environment, and other community characteristics.



High density housing can have high amenity levels as in this example near the Ballston Metro stop in Northern Virginia

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## Notes

\*It should be noted that the research on social capital varies widely in its measurement of the concept. Consistent with this research and for the purposes of this document, we assume that there are a number of indicators of social capital including sense of community, political participation, trust in neighbors or others in one's community, and social cohesion. See Brisson and Usher 2005, Leyden 2003, Lund 2002, and Williamson 2004 for examples.

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