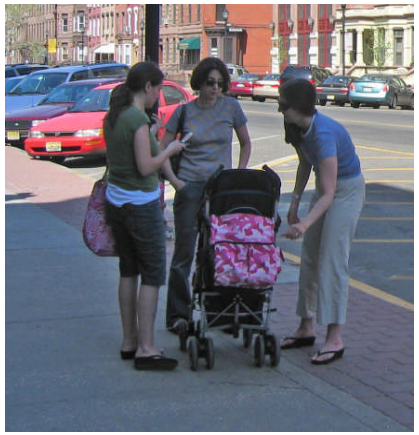
Pattern 5: Neighborhoods

"Lowly, unpurposeful and random as they may appear, sidewalk contacts are the small change from which a city's wealth of public life may grow." –Jane Jacobs




The neighborhood is a uniquely important element in a community's form. As the place that links the community's most private spaces with the world outside, neighborhoods shape personal experiences, relationships, and community life in profound ways. Seemingly small details, from parks to porches, may make the difference between neighbors who know each other well and those who are neighbors in name only.

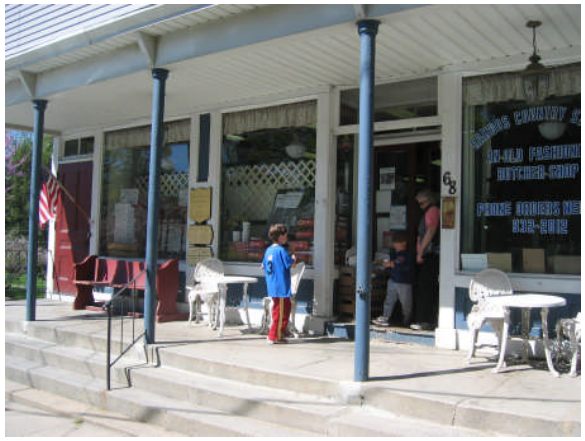
The physical form of a neighborhood is especially influential in determining tripmaking patterns. It sets the origin for numerous daily household trips and often determines whether they can be made on foot, by bike, or by transit. It can provide an array of nearby destinations—or hardly any. High speeds on local streets, as well as security concerns, can diminish pedestrian mobility

as well as the enjoyment a house or yard provides its inhabitants. These problems may result in children being kept indoors, reducing their opportunities for neighborhood play and exercise. Conversely, well designed neighborhood streets, with sidewalks or pathways connecting homes and nearby schools, encourage children and families to do more walking.

Community Form and Mobility Principles

Four key principles define mobility-friendly neighborhood planning:

- Mixed Use and Housing Diversity,
- Neighborhood Schools,
- Pedestrian Access, and
- Street Scale.



Mixed Use and Housing Diversity:

Create compact neighborhoods that combine homes of varied sizes with other uses (such as shops, workplaces, public buildings, and green spaces) close by.

The principle of mixing land uses in compact clusters is central to mobility planning and is a key policy of the New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan. By placing stores and services near housing instead of in separate developments, mixed use communities encourage walking for many daily needs, increasing health and reducing the need for automobile ownership. As residents walk, bike, or take short driving trips to nearby destinations in the course of the day, they have many more opportunities to interact with their neighbors than in auto-oriented residential developments. This can help to foster neighborliness, sociability, and a sense of belonging.

In addition to promoting a shared civic culture building upon neighborhood life, mixed use neighborhoods encourage independent mobility for children and non-drivers. They provide senior citizens with life-long mobility, putting basic services

and shopping within easy reach. Mixed use neighborhoods also tend to provide more variety and visual interest in their surroundings, and they help to provide natural surveillance through the presence of people throughout the day, deterring crime.

Homes, shops and parks are within easy walking distance in Spring Lake.

Compact residential clusters in mixed use neighborhoods help to support efficient transit service. They provide local workers with access to lunch places and other services nearby, reducing midday congestion on major roads. Compact residential clusters may also allow for more public open space and conservation of natural areas and farmland, enhancing quality of life.

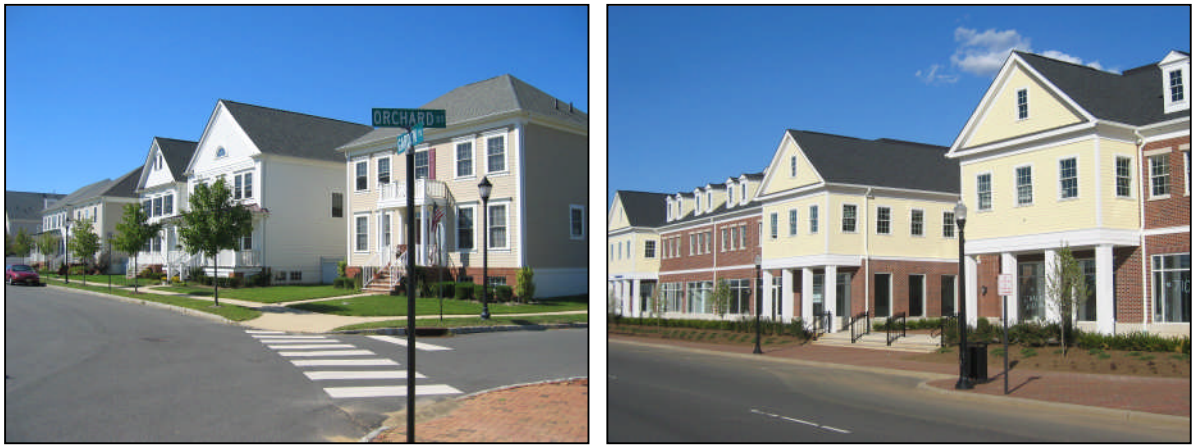
Similarly, where the long term use of retail and office space can be well controlled, consider building shared parking that can be used by businesses during the day and by residents over night. Reducing the amount of parking that is needed allows land to be used for other purposes, such as recreation space or additional building area, and also reduces construction costs, which could then be used for other amenities.

Locally-owned businesses provide valued services and fit well in residential neighborhoods.

"People want to be close to shops and services, for excitement and convenience. And they want to be away from services, for quiet and green. The exact balance of these two desires varies from person to person…" – Christopher Alexander

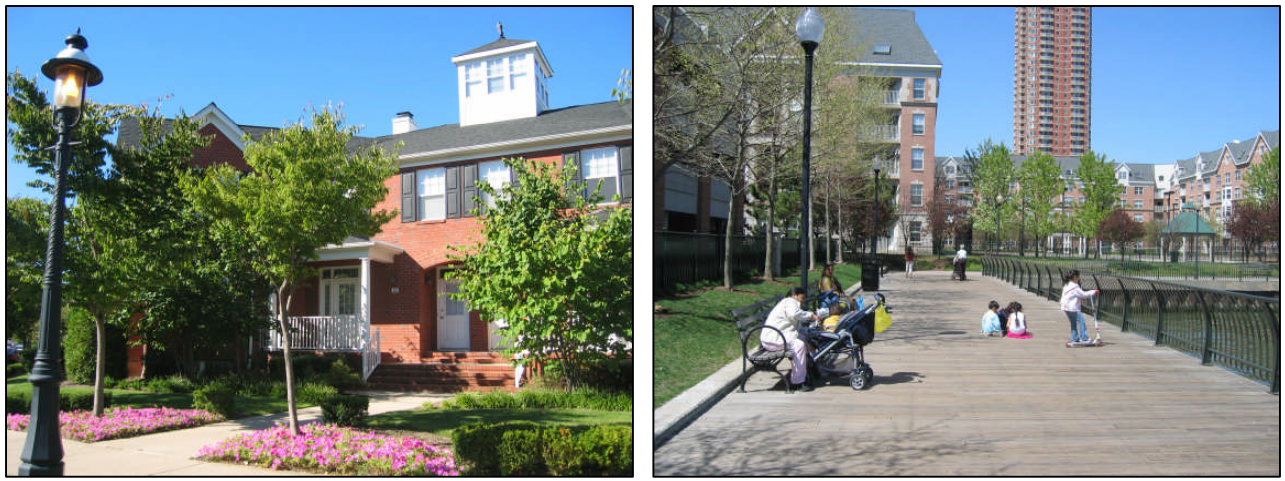
Town Center Planning

Seeking a remedy for uncontrolled sprawl, several suburban New Jersey communities have developed area master plans to create focused "town centers." Planned Town Centers, such as those in Washington Township (Mercer County) and Plainsboro Township (Middlesex County), may be designed as neo-traditional downtowns. A center that includes diverse housing options, retail, schools, sidewalks, and parks is attractive to many New Jersey families, as well as to municipal governments. The *New Urban News* noted, "Ironically, it may be the very desire for a better quality of life that is moving ratables in a positive direction. By building a community that attracts residents from varying demographics, consists of several housing unit types and conserves open space, Washington Township has built a better tax base…" Other communities have taken a step toward mixed use simply by allowing small-scale retail uses in neighborhoods.



Washington Town Center (left) and Plainsboro Town Center (right) are both examples of new villages built on the tradition mixed use center model.

A closely related principle is that of housing diversity. A policy of providing for a mix of housing types and sizes allows young people, independent seniors, and moderate income professionals – such as schoolteachers and law enforcement officers – to move into or remain in the community, reducing the need for travel. Housing variety also allows people to remain in a community throughout the life cycle, rather than requiring them to move as their housing needs change. This may enable the generations of a family to live a short distance apart. The presence of seniors who have lived in a community for years provides for a rich sense of local history, allows them to remain as valuable members of the community and actually promotes longer lifespans. Housing diversity also encourages interaction across income divides. Diversity can often be achieved through infill development or the redevelopment of vacant or underutilized buildings to provide for smaller homes, apartments or condominiums.



Attractive designs help generate community support for multi-family infill projects, like these in Metuchen (left) and Jersey City (right).

Another critical reason to plan for a diverse range of housing types is to ensure that each municipality meets its fair share obligation under state Council on Affordable Housing (COAH) rules. The COAH methodology has changed and now requires one affordable unit for every 8 market-rate residential units plus one unit for every 25 jobs resulting from non-residential construction during the period 2004-2014. Communities that meet their affordable housing obligations are in a far better

position to implement their master plans, enforce their development regulations, and thus exercise control over the future of their communities than those that do not take this step.

Municipalities seeking to promote mixed-use development and housing variety may wish to consider updating housing goals and policies of their master plans in close coordination with land use and circulation goals and policies.

Disadvantages of Large-Lot Zoning

In many parts of New Jersey, a desire to limit overall development has led to the use of large-lot zoning that yields only one type of housing: large, single-family homes. The fiscal and environmental concerns leading to the limited variety of suburban housing are real, but these housing trends have serious long-term implications for the quality of community life as well as for the transportation system.

From a transportation standpoint, large-lot zoning promotes almost total reliance on the automobile and results in longer trips than would occur in more compact, center-based communities. Virtually no household needs can be met by walking, and it is impractical to provide even minimal public transit service to these low density settlements.

Concerns about the cost of educating school children have led to another type of uniformity as well: reliance on age-segregated housing as the chief, or even sole, form of new housing being developed in some communities.

In either case, what results is a detached one-dimensional pod development that is expensive and difficult to reach with infrastructure and services.

Neighborhood Schools:
Locate schools near neighborhoods where possible, and in all cases, create safe routes for children to travel to school.

In addition to mixed uses and diversity of housing, mobility-friendly community forms typically include neighborhood schools with safe pedestrian connections from surrounding streets. Neighborhood elementary and middle schools are especially important in establishing independent mobility for children. At the high school level, larger regional schools have become the norm in many areas of New Jersey. Through careful planning and multi-story designs, even these larger schools can be integrated with surrounding land uses, providing walking or bicycle access for a portion of the students.

"Construction of new schools in outlying areas can greatly alter a community's future growth patterns. Often such schools establish beachheads for residential sprawl." – National Trust for Historic Preservation

Elise Bremer-Nei

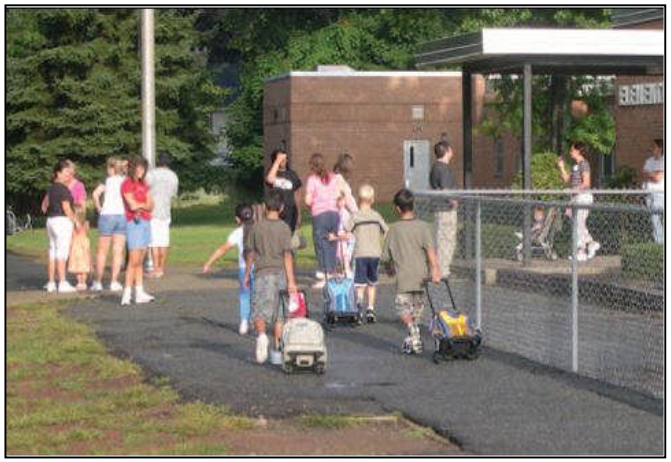
Walkable neighborhood schools give children and teenagers independent mobility, reducing the amount of chauffering parents need to do, as well as lessening the traffic congestion around school drop-off areas. By walking to school, children also have a chance to form a lifelong habit of walking. Parents who prefer to meet their young child at school in the afternoon can walk or bike to do so—and possibly enjoy a conversation with other parents as they wait for children to be dismissed. Those parents without access to cars can be more involved in their children's school when it is a short distance away than when special arrangements must be made for rides. Neighborhood schools can further serve as gathering places for all ages, providing a convenient location for night classes, organizational meetings, sports activities, and community entertainment.

Planning for schools should address issues of traffic and parking and ensure that the neighborhood around a school is friendly to pedestrians, bicyclists, and citizens of all ages. Techniques for developing "safe routes to schools" are now widely available as part of the national movement by this name; NJDOT provides technical assistance and a program to encourage development of safe routes.

Safe Routes to Schools

SAFETEA-LU, the federal transportation re-authorization legislation signed in 2005, includes a national Safe Routes to School (SRTS) Program. SRTS is a community approach to encourage more people to walk and bicycle to school safely, improve road safety and reduce child casualties, improve children's health and development, and reduce traffic congestion and pollution. In New Jersey, the Department of Transportation is responsible for the SRTS program, in partnership with other state agencies including the Departments of Education, Health, and Community Affairs.

NJDOT has moved forward on a statewide initiative to foster Safe Routes to Schools, completing pilot programs in several communities. Community-based tools and resource materials have been developed to address the diverse urban, rural and suburban character of New Jersey's schools. More information is available on the NJDOT SRTS website.



Students in Wharton Borough are participating in a "Safe Routes to Schools" pilot program initiated by Morris County. The program includes route identification, safety improvements, and classroom activities.

Pedestrian Access:

Ensure that all destinations in a neighborhood can be conveniently reached on foot and all neighborhood streets can be crossed safely on foot and in wheelchairs.

Wide sidewalks (above) make access easier for a variety of users. But sidewalk construction must be coordinated with street construction (right).

An ideal neighborhood provides universal access for pedestrians, including wheelchair users, mobility impaired, and visually impaired pedestrians. While these conditions can be difficult to achieve in automobile-oriented communities, they are worth planning for over the long term, especially given the rising age of the state's population. Walkable environments are also important to many homebuyers.

The ***Circulation*** pattern discussed the features needed to create "complete streets" that serve pedestrians and other users. However, pedestrian access is not just a matter of providing sidewalks and well-designed crossings. Careful land use planning and site design are just as important. For example, local master plans should encourage careful siting of senior citizen communities, so that seniors can live within easy walking distance of town centers. Careful attention must be paid to the details of walkway design, such as curb heights, ramp locations, pedestrian signal hardware and so on, when designing to enhance senior mobility. Developers of age-restricted communities may also be required to provide sidewalks and paths that connect these developments to surrounding land uses. Otherwise, many of these seniors will lose basic mobility once they are no longer comfortable driving.

Pedestrian Pathways

In Lawrence Township, development ordinances allow the Planning Board to require pedestrian easements and sidewalk construction. This has resulted in construction of pedestrian pathways linking residential neighborhoods to various destinations. For example, a walkway was created between a senior citizen residence and a community shopping center, enabling seniors to cart their groceries home. Similar strategies can be used to create new linkages between neighborhoods and commercial centers that were originally built as isolated developments. Contrast this with the "game trail" that has developed along Route 18 in East Brunswick and the ramp to nowhere in Haddonfield.

Street Scale:
Street characteristics, including widths and design speeds, should be scaled to the type and placement of neighborhood buildings.

A pathway through a mixed-use building (retail on the ground floor and residences above) provides pedestrian connections and adds visual interest to this street in Princeton Borough.

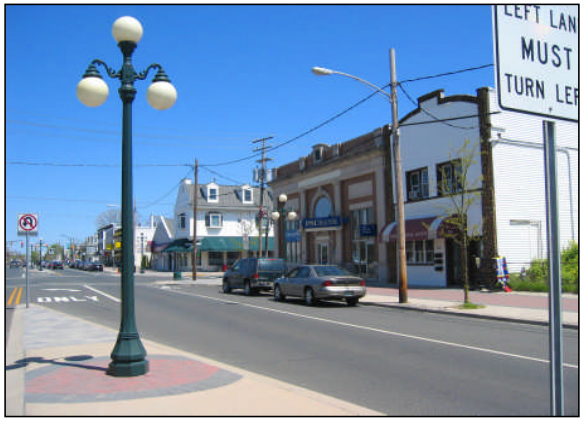
The design of neighborhood streets is a critical consideration for establishing mobility-friendly communities. The width and speed of a neighborhood street should be scaled to the surrounding land uses. Residential streets lined with single family homes, town houses or low-rise apartments should be relatively narrow and slow-moving. Where boulevards adjoin larger scale apartment blocks, or are separated from buildings by slow-moving access roads, higher speeds may be appropriate. Providing for safe and comfortable pedestrian use of residential streets should be a priority in any community. Regional trips should be directed to highway facilities.

Where neighborhood traffic routinely exceeds 25 mph, it is especially important to provide a buffer zone between pedestrians and automobiles. A landscaped space or street trees can provide this buffer and add to the character of the street. Consideration should be given to engineering standards and traffic calming methods that bring driving speeds into harmony with the neighborhood scale.

On Valley Street in South Orange, a street realignment helps to slow traffic.

Road Diet

A "road diet," as its name suggests, is a technique that reduces the number of or width of lanes on wide roads to bring them into better scale with their surroundings and make them safer for all modes. Typically, this is done by removing one or more lanes from a 4-lane road and using the space gained to provide turn lanes, medians and islands, bicycle lanes, shoulders, wider sidewalks, or street parking. While new amenities such as landscaped medians improve the road's appearance, perhaps the greatest benefit of the road diet is that it greatly reduces traffic speeds. Transportation engineers have found that a road that feels narrower and is full of people causes drivers to drive slower and more carefully—regardless of the posted speed limit. As a result, on these "tamed" roads, traffic speeds are reduced, pedestrian crossings are facilitated, and traffic operations can often be improved as well. Road diets have been successfully implemented in New Jersey communities such as Avon-by-the-Sea, South Orange, and Lawrence Township.



Main Street (Route 71) in Avon by the Sea (Monmouth County) and Federal City Road in Lawrence Township (Mercer County) provide good examples of "road diets."

Resources for Neighborhoods

Active Living by Design. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. http://www.activelivingbydesign.org/

"Children and Schools," Smart Growth America. http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/children.html

Creating Communities of Learning: Schools and Smart Growth. Ellen Shoshkes, NJ Office of State Planning, 2002. http://newjersey.gov/dca/osg/docs/learning040104.pdf

Creating Livable Streets: Street Design Guidelines for 2040. Metro (Portland, OR), 2002.

Four-Lane to Three-Lane Conversion. Center for Transportation Research and Education, Iowa State University. http://www.ctre.iastate.edu/research/4laneto3lane.htm

National Safe Routes to School Clearinghouse. http://www.saferoutesinfo.org/

Neighborhoods, Regions, and Smart Growth Toolkit: The Smart Growth, Better Neighborhoods Action Guide. Washington, D.C.: National Neighborhood Coalition.

"Old School Buildings: Prehistoric or Worth Preserving?" http://www.education-world.com/a_issues/issues172.shtml

Preserving Community Character in Hunterdon County: A Community Design Handbook. The Hunterdon County Planning Board, December 1999. http://www.co.hunterdon.nj.us/pdf/hcpb/CommunityDesignBook.pdf\

Smart Future Planning Grants, Office of Smart Growth, New Jersey Department of Community Affairs. http://www.state.nj.us/dca/osg/resources/grants/index.shtml

Walkable Communities, Inc. www.walkable.org

Safe Routes to School Program, Morris County (NJ) Division of Transportation. http://www.mcdot.org/Accessories/Transportation-SaferoutestoSchool.asp