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From Grey to Gold: Planning out of Obsolescence

Greyfield development is emerging as a new opportunity for communities and planners. Greyfields are “single-use landscapes that had become obsolete” but did not have the contamination of brownfield sites.¹ This paper presents two premier examples of greyfield development: Mashpee Commons in Mashpee, Massachusetts and Highlands Garden Village in Denver, Colorado. The similar features of these two developments reveal underlying goals of smart growth and related challenges. However, both examples provide different development contexts that reveal the nuances of smart growth in greater relief. This paper outlines those details and nuances looking at a brief history of the initial development. Next, the paper builds a view of the smart growth features including the building mix, general physical design, and aspects of explicitly planned community features. The summation of this paper will offer closing points on the impact of these developments and the projects’ reflection on smart growth.

Mashpee Commons is an example of smart growth, new urbanism, or traditional neighborhood development long before they were common phrases. Mashpee, a community at the base of the Cape Cod peninsula, was home to the type of strip development common to Anytown, USA. As the strip mall died, Buff Chace and his partner Douglas Stoors saw an opportunity to do something different.² They set out to develop a pedestrian-oriented town center in place of the dying strip-mall. The developers started with an inventory of the features of a traditional New England town. Realizing they would need more space, they bought land on both sides of Routes 28 and 151, expanding to 255 acres.³ In 1986, developers entered into the first phases of public meetings about the center’s design. After negotiations, the town granted development rights for three blocks of the commercial core, which they finished by 1988. Today, Mashpee Commons expands to include six interrelated mixed-use neighborhoods all of which are in various phases of construction. In total Mashpee currently has 97,923 square feet of

¹ Segel. (2006). Highlands Garden Village. *In Harvard Business Online* <<http://www.hbsp.harvard.edu>>, p. 5

² Benfield, Terris and Vorsanger (2001). Solving Sprawl: Models of Smart Growth in Communities Across America., p. 111

³ Ibid., p. 112

retail, 24,505 square feet of restaurant, 36,415 square feet of office and 13,250 square feet of theatre space.⁴ It has grown into a successful small downtown in a land of large lots and septic tanks and presents hope for many suburban greyfields searching for purpose.

Highlands Garden Village exists near the West Highlands neighborhood in Denver. It sits on what used to be Elitch Gardens, a family-owned amusement park that could no longer compete with the larger parks. Unlike Mashpee, this site is urban, already sitting within a network of gridded streets in a Denver neighborhood. However, before it became the Highlands Garden Village, the owners of the vacant site sought to develop the site into another regional shopping center. The outcry was so loud, that the Gurtlers—owners of the vacant land—worked with the West Highland Neighborhood Association (WHNA) and city on a request for proposal. The winning proposal came back from Perry Rose, LLC—a planning, development, and advisory firm. Perry Rose worked mainly in the Rocky Mountain region on mixed-income projects. Both Chuck Perry and Jonathan Rose had extensive experience working on innovative mixed-use and adaptive reuse projects.⁵ They approached this project as a sustainable, mixed-use, mixed-income active community. Working with Calthorpe, they produced a 12-block community reflecting New Urbanist ideals discussed in more detail later. After acceptance, Perry and Rose did not expect the trouble they received from a “vocal minority” that opposed the project on specious claims, probably hiding underlying prejudices about affordable housing.⁶ After two years of negotiations, Perry and Rose received approval from the community and the city on the 27-acre site and purchased it with \$2.4 million of their own equity in 1998.⁷ Under special Planned Unit Development (PUD) zoning, Perry and Rose completed a new, vibrant community from scratch and earned recognition from the EPA in 2005 with the National Award for Smart Growth Achievement.⁸

Building a sense of place guided each of the developers in their separate processes. In Mashpee and Highlands, the developers yearned to build more interesting and sustainable places. Places like this fall under the banner of smart growth, but its definition lacks clarity. The next

⁴ Massachusetts State Government. Smart Growth Toolkit. *Traditional Neighborhood Development Urban Case Study* <http://www.mass.gov/envir/smart_growth_toolkit/pages/CS-tnd-mashpee.html>

⁵ Supra note 1, p. 2

⁶ Supra note 1, p. 8

⁷ Supra note 1, p. 9

⁸ US EPA. Smart Growth Illustrated. *Highlands' Garden Village, Denver, Colorado*. <<http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/case/highland.htm>>

few sections explain features of these developments that make them smart growth or at least smarter growth.

The right mix of building types can really help to make a more dynamic and vibrant community. In both developments, the developers desired a mix of commercial and residential. Buff Chace had less flexibility and cooperation in the zoning to support the ultimate vision in 1986. However, he started with a dense commercial core built around the existing strip mall to prove his concept and is slowly chipping away at the decision makers. Perry and Rose were luckier because they received approval for the full development before proceeding in phases. Currently, Chace and his associates have approval for the original Mashpee Commons and the North Market Street Neighborhood. These areas account for a total allowed build-out of 255,000 square feet and up to 100 dwelling units. As of September 2006, 40 dwelling units are complete and six neighborhood plans await approval process among local, regional and state agencies.⁹ The current mix of housing includes 37 apartments and 3 live/work units. Nonetheless, they do have their hopes set on a full service community and already have a local library, fire and police departments, and a nearby church. Zoning approval has been a hindrance to the Mashpee development, which will have a more diverse stock of housing if completely built. Ten percent of the planned residential units will be affordable as well. The vision is strong in Mashpee, but the challenges are many.

Perry and Rose, however, are more fortunate. Their mix of 305 units includes 52 single family homes, 20 carriage homes, 64 town homes and condos, 63 senior housing units, 74 multifamily units, and 33 co-housing units.¹⁰ Much like Chace, Calthorpe, Perry and Rose adopted local styles for their new building stock.¹¹ Other than having a nostalgic appeal, adapting local styles creates consistency with immediately adjacent communities. Additionally, 40% of senior housing is affordable and 20% of standard housing is affordable. Calthorpe proposed housing be no more than two blocks from commercial areas. The main commercial area created along 38th Street provides an anchor not just for the planned community but also for the surrounding neighborhoods. This kind of vision builds economic sustainability for the area as well as for the city of Denver. The city of Denver approved the plan as a PUD allowing them

⁹ Mashpee Commons Limited Partnership. *Living in Mashpee Commons*.
<<http://www.mashpeecommons.com/living.php>>

¹⁰ Supra note 1, table A

¹¹ Supra note 1, p. 7

to avoid hassles of individual lot rezoning, and the city provided a Tax-Incremental Financing (TIF) plan to aid them in the financing of the project. Unlike the Mashpee project, Highlands had the support and aid of the city, allowing them to realize the full built potential of their vision.

The mix of uses and incomes constitutes smart growth for a number of reasons. One is that the mix of housing and incomes create social sustainability. Diversity in housing, ages and affordability allows a mix of people to live together that otherwise would not, making a place more interesting. More eyes on the street also make a place safer. A mix of uses allows people to get out of their cars and contribute to environmental sustainability and promotes exercise and general health. Moreover, commercial spaces contribute to increased tax revenue for cities and more jobs in the surrounding neighborhoods, enabling economic sustainability. Altogether, mixing of incomes and uses contributes to smart growth by facilitating communities that will last long after the strip malls and amusement parks become obsolete.

In both Mashpee and Highlands, the developers drew on common design features to promote activity and community and to protect and nurture the environment. Common to both developments are narrow, sidewalked streets to promote pedestrian activity.¹² Mashpee has a much larger and more central commercial component, but both developments adhere to design guidelines to create rhythm and consistency along storefronts. The visual interest and walkability bring people on to the street and again promote a sense of security. Both developments utilize large open spaces as a means of conservation and storm water management.¹³ Incidentally, these spaces also provide gathering places for community members to mingle. Chance encounters are more likely to occur in this environment, contributing to the overall well-being and sense of community. The Highlands development has more active parks and community gardens as part of a conscious community building exercise. As a result, neighbors have formed gardening groups to maintain the trees and gardens in the public spaces.¹⁴ This type of activity engenders residential affinity for the neighborhood and consequently social sustainability. In building Highlands, John Rose took particular care in maintaining the mature trees during construction, using recycled and recyclable building materials, and utilizing renewable energy for all civic buildings and parks.¹⁵ These aspects constitute green building—

¹² Supra note 4; Supra note 1, p. 7

¹³ Supra note 1, p. 11; Supra note 2, p. 113

¹⁴ Supra note 1, p. 11

¹⁵ Supra note 1, p. 8

synonymous with sustainable building or architecture. This was not as much an active concern in the first phases at Mashpee, but may be in the later stages. Developers in both cases carefully considered making more interesting and socially vibrant communities. The Highlands benefited from a more directed and conscious effort toward smart growth and sustainability, but Mashpee led in redeveloping greyfields before it was in fashion.

The more holistically successful smart growth project is the Highlands Garden Village; however, this does not make Mashpee a failure. The similarities between the two projects are many. Each desired a mix of housing and incomes, committed to creating walkable communities, dealt with initial permitting struggles, and recreated an obsolete greyfield into a vibrant place. The comparison is even more interesting in the differences. The struggles of Mashpee point to a very hard battle that planners have in the future. PriceWaterhouseCoopers did a study on dead mall in 2000 and found that 7% of all regional malls were obsolete and another 12% would become obsolete by 2005.¹⁶ This does not include the myriad of strip malls, military bases and other single use landscapes that may go obsolete. Planners have a real opportunity to open these sites up to new, smart growth development but not without changing the pervasive view on zoning in the suburbs—large lots and separation of all uses. But the Mashpee case shows that many of the decision makers in the suburbs are entrenched in stubborn. The Highlands case shows that with the support of decision makers and creative financing and zoning, planners and developers can accomplish highly visionary goals.

¹⁶ PWC Global Strategic Research Group. (2001). Greyfield Regional Mall Study. <http://www.cnu.org/cnu_reports/Greyfield_Feb_01.pdf>