Planning for Small Towns

Distinctive Issues in Small Town Planning

- Small town planning presents unique challenges and opportunities
- Important not to see small towns simply as “scaled-down cities”
- Small size and heightened importance of surrounding rural areas bring challenges not faced by larger centers

Small Town Planning

- Changes that might appear small to a resident of a large city are actually quite significant in a small town context
  - Example: school closures are important in all communities, but in small towns school facilities are also often the hub of community life (school closure = community closure)

Small Town Planning

- Changes that might appear small to a resident of a large city are actually quite significant in a small town context
  - Case in point: Megargel, Texas (population 203)
  - A town that went through the difficult decision of what to do with its declining local school
Small Town Planning

- Megargel, TX
  - When do you decide that you cannot support a school, even if that means the death of your town?
  - Megargel’s voters decided in 2006 to close their school (89% in favor)
  - Megargel faced decisions (and consequences) that many Texas towns and ISDs have had to face over the past few decades, and more will confront in the next few years.

---

FALLING NUMBERS
Drop in Texas’ public school districts:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Districts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>2,748</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>1,581</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>1,219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>1,099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>1,067</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1,048</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>1,024</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCES: Texas Education Agency, Dallas Morning News, Fort Worth Star-Telegram

---

From an analysis done by the Dallas Morning News in 2006

Breakdown of Texas school districts by number of students

---

Small Town Planning

- School reform and small town decline isn’t only an issue in Texas.
  - For example, Washington state has gone from 2,710 school districts in 1900 to 295 today.
  - Of the remaining 295 districts in WA, 62 still have fewer than 200 students.
  - Small town politicians and planners in many areas of the US are dealing with very similar issues.

See the small town case studies posted in the syllabus and handouts folder on the GEOG 4210 website: http://www.murrayrice.com/geog-4210.html
Small Town Planning

- Important to understand the ways in which small town life is unique to develop a successful small town plan

- The DQ for this week asked you to consider one small town, Booneville, and the issues it faces
  - Q: how would you say Booneville’s issues differ from what planners and developers deal with in D-FW?

Small Town Planning

- One way we can adjust our thinking for small town planning is in the area of zoning
  - Large city zoning focuses on actual land uses
    - Anticipate community impacts by activity type
    - Example: Autobody repair is not allowed in large city residential areas (blanket ban)

Small Town Planning

- In small towns, a greater degree of flexibility might be given to development
  - Focus: regulate the impacts of development, not specifics of which activity is allowed where
  - No list of activities allowed/not allowed in a given zone (business, residential), only principles that must be met

Small Town Planning

- Two broad types of development issues relating to small towns
  1. Physical Development Issues
  2. Social Development Issues

Small Town Planning

- This means that land uses that would be rejected in a large city can be approved in a small town setting
  - Businesses of many kinds can be established in small town residential areas as long as activity does not impact neighbors
  - By contrast, in large cities many kinds of businesses are restricted or banned outright for home-based businesses
Small Town Planning

- Two broad types of development issues relating to small towns
  - 1. Physical Development Issues
    - Some physical issues with small town development relate directly to the small areas, small populations, and low growth rates characteristic of these places
    - Not ordinarily part of planning in large cities
  - Access to the national highway system may be poor, due to both remote locations and poor quality roads
  - Big economic development implications: for example, the case of Doepker Industries
    - A manufacturer of heavy equipment, such as semi-trailers and grain haulers
- Population aging is a particularly severe issue in rural areas across North America
- Some public services (health, home care) are especially needed and especially expensive to provide in remote and aging rural communities

Doepker Industries: a large manufacturer based in a small town

- Population 270,000
- Population 500

Small Town Planning

- Two broad types of development issues relating to small towns
  - 1. Physical Development Issues
    - Many very small towns have no community-wide water supply or sewage system
    - Waste management and upkeep of public properties (e.g. parks, playgrounds) is a heavy burden for a small tax base to bear
  - Movement of a large, new group of people into an area, displacing and disturbing long-time residents

Small Town Planning

- Two broad types of development issues relating to small towns
  - 2. Social Development Issues
    - Population cleavage is another, related social trend
    - Movement of a large, new group of people into an area, displacing and disturbing long-time residents
Small Town Planning

Two broad types of development issues relating to small towns

2. Social Development Issues

Population cleavage is especially important in two situations

1. Small towns on the fringes of large metro areas (large group = city dwellers seeking a more peaceful life or cheaper housing)

Small Town Planning

Q:

- How are small communities and long-time residents impacted by an area’s popularization as a summer destination?
- Positive impacts? Negative impacts?

Small Town Case Study

A short case study can help us appreciate some of the challenges and issues faced in planning for a small town

Case Study: Port Gamble, Washington

Case Study: Port Gamble, WA
Case Study: Port Gamble, WA

Port Gamble is across Puget Sound from Seattle (1 to 2 hours of travel time, depending on route taken).
Case Study: Port Gamble, WA

- **Case Study**: Port Gamble, Washington
  - Port Gamble is a “company town”
  - Town is owned by Pope Resources, a lumber company that has dominated the town since it was founded in 1853
Case Study: Port Gamble, WA

- **Case Study:** Port Gamble, Washington
- Over recent decades the town and its lumber operations have slowly declined, ending with the closing of the lumber mill in 1995 (town population, 100)

- **Case Study:** Port Gamble, Washington
- With a considerable investment in the area (4000 acres of land, and all buildings in the town), Pope wanted to think creatively about maximizing the value of its investment in Port Gamble.

- **Case Study:** Port Gamble, Washington
- Pope approached the county government with a proposal to redevelop the town.
- New basis for local economy: festivals, specialty shopping, and tourism (see the town’s web site, [www.portgamble.com](http://www.portgamble.com))

- **Case Study:** Port Gamble, Washington
- Example of new approach: working to renovate and restore historic buildings (town has special status as a state historic site)
- A “picture-postcard” town
Case Study: Port Gamble, WA

- **Case Study:** Port Gamble, Washington
- Company promotes the town as a site for annual festivals (Octoberfest), weddings, and even movie productions

---

Case Study: Port Gamble, WA

- **Case Study:** Port Gamble, Washington
- Company has sought out specialty businesses as tenants for the town’s main business area

---

A feature on Port Gamble’s historic features from *The Seattle Times*
Case Study: Port Gamble, WA

Case Study: Port Gamble, Washington
- Company has sought out specialty businesses as tenants for the town’s main business area

Q: What do you think some of the key challenges might be for Port Gamble?
- The town’s owner (Pope Resources)
- The town’s businesses (specialty/tourist)
- The town’s residents
- If you worked for Pope Resources or for the county planning department, what would you be interested in promoting here? Avoiding?
  Small groups for 4 minutes

Small Town Planning

“Four dimensions of small town development”

1. Scale of Development
   - Scale: in terms of both population and area
   - Growth and decline involves small absolute numbers, even if the percentages are large
   - 50% growth in a town of 300 = 150 people

2. Range of Development
   - Range here = variety
   - Local population: much uniformity (family types, social and income classes)
   - Local business community: a few local services (grocery store, gas station) and a few community-sustaining businesses (commonly agriculture or a small manufacturer)
Small Town Planning

- “Four dimensions of small town development”
- 3. Intensity of Development
  - For our purposes, think of intensity in a geographic context
  - Small towns are characterized by scattered development
  - No large, integrated industrial districts

Small Town Planning

- “Four dimensions of small town development”
- 4. Pace of Development
  - The pace of small town development is uneven (many slow times, a few good times)
  - Each project must be treated with greater care than would be given a similar project in a larger center, because even a small project is important

Small Town Case Study

- Let’s use another case study now to illustrate how these dimensions impact what is possible in small town development
  - Keep the “four dimensions” in mind (scale, range, intensity, pace) as we look at this case study
  - Case Study Focus: the city of Trinidad, located in south central Colorado

Case Study: Trinidad, Colorado

Case Study: Trinidad, Colorado

Trinidad

Denver

New Orleans

Kansas City

Tulsa

Albuquerque

Oklahoma City

Fort Worth

Dallas

Pueblo

Trinidad

CO

NM

OK

TX
Case Study: Trinidad, Colorado

- Trinidad has many planning challenges that are common to many small communities across North America
  - Trinidad is a small city (2010 population: 9,096 people)
  - The local population trend is basically flat (2000-2010 population growth rate: 0.09%)

- Trinidad's stability has been enhanced by the presence of a small college (Trinidad State Junior College) that has been an ongoing source of employment since 1925
  - However, Trinidad has had some high-growth years as a booming mining town located at a key pass on the north branch of the Santa Fe Trail back in the 1800s

Key Issue: how can Trinidad continue to offer good job opportunities and a high quality of life for its residents in the 21st Century?

- Trinidad has a number of factors working in its favor, including an abundance of natural beauty, historic significance (as just mentioned), and interesting architecture
Being located on Interstate 25 halfway between Denver and Santa Fe means that the town is torn in two directions.

- Potential for tourism-driven growth coming from its highway location and nearby mountain scenery.
- But residents also have a strong desire to keep Trinidad’s small town character.
Case Study: Trinidad, Colorado

- In recent years, the city has tried to develop its image with amenities that would be attractive to visitors, while being sensitive to the region’s historical roots.
- A few initiatives worth noting:
  1. Development of a Riverwalk feature
  2. Promotion of regular cultural events
  3. Efforts to preserve and promote local architecture and history

Trinidad: Riverwalk

- The Purgatoire River flows through Trinidad.
- The city has developed a corridor along the river to function as a “people place”
- Riverwalk (trails along river)
- Cimino Park (children’s play area next to Riverwalk)

Trinidad: Riverwalk

Trinidad: Riverwalk

Trinidad: Riverwalk

Trinidad: Riverwalk
Trinidad: Riverwalk

Q: What do you think of the Riverwalk strategy used in Trinidad? Strengths? Weaknesses? What do they need to do to make this work as well as possible?

Trinidad: Cultural Events

The community in Trinidad has developed a series of events to keep people coming back to Trinidad throughout the summer:

- Santa Fe Trail Days (June): celebrates Trinidad’s past as a prominent stop on the trail
- Mt. Carmel Live Festival (July): live entertainment, food, craft vendors
- TrindieBluesFest (August): concerts featuring regional bands
- TrindieFest (September): independent film festival
- Trinidad Farmers Market (all summer): by the river

Q: What do you think of the event strategy used in Trinidad? Strengths? Weaknesses? What do they need to do to make this work?
Trinidad: Historical Preservation

- Trinidad has a rich legacy of unique heritage buildings and connections with the past

The city focuses on these historic connections as crucial components of its external promotion and communication efforts.

A Coal Mining Monument in Trinidad’s downtown area. Mining was a crucial component of Trinidad’s growth through the 1930s.

Trinidad operates free trolley rides to show the city’s landmark building and districts, and tell the region’s story.

Despite the value of history to Trinidad, physical realities are taking a toll.
- Many of Trinidad’s landmark structures date from the 1800s, and are in dire need of investment and repair.

The Schneider Brewery Building (1888) is one of Trinidad’s most prominent landmarks. It is in need of reinforcement and general repair to avoid collapse.

A Denver-area property developer purchased the building with intentions of converting to condominiums before the 2008 economic collapse. The building has sat untouched since then.
Beyond age, the other factor that is threatening Trinidad's historic structures is seismic activity.

- Trinidad happens to be in the most active earthquake zone in Colorado.
- Recent earthquake (2011): magnitude 5.3.

Example: Trinidad's opera house has been vacated because of earthquake damage.

Trinidad has many historic buildings in need of investment and repair.

Q: What do you think Trinidad should do about its historic assets? Are there realistic strategies?

Q: How do you see the “four dimensions of small town development” (scale, range, intensity, pace) having an impact on Trinidad?

- Are there particular opportunities that you see as most important for Trinidad to take advantage of?
- Are there particular issues that limit Trinidad’s prospects?