

## **Re-zoning For Sustainable Development in a Built Urban Environment**

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Often touted as the solution to sprawl, New Urbanism promotes mixed-use neighborhoods and walkable communities. Many practitioners build brand new towns, villages and neighborhoods, and some focus on infill development. Locally, these infill developments have occurred mostly within the City of Pittsburgh. However, a model to help the 129 other small boroughs and towns within Allegheny County to preserve their walkable communities and attract residents back from the suburbs is badly needed. Most of these little towns were built before WWII and therefore were built with mixed-use areas and neighborhood business districts, the very thing that New Urbanism is trying to recreate

Unfortunately, old zoning requirements and building codes that fit suburbs create disincentives to renovate existing structures/areas. Antiquated codes and ordinances allow strip malls and parking lots to proliferate where neighborhood businesses once stood. They are geared more toward suburban development, and result in the destruction of the inherent historical and social assets which are the main attraction of established urban neighborhoods.

It is clear that local government involvement in land use is required. However, it is also clear that we should not continue on the current path. Land use regulations, or zoning ordinances, are stifling innovation and distorting real estate markets by trying to determine specific outcomes and development patterns. Those outcomes are best determined by the market discovery process. Just as modern machinery requires state-of-the-art tools, today's urban development problems require a state-of-the-art land use ordinances.

It has long been known that metropolitan areas continuously expand people and jobs outward. These forces of expansion, driven by the post-war expansion of roads and highways, have moved the boundaries of metropolitan areas well into the surrounding hinterlands. As commercial and residential development sprawled along the radial corridors linking city and suburb, pre-war suburban cities previously at the edge of urbanization were first enveloped by the inner urban economy then bypassed in favor of the new edge city sprawl. Some inner suburban communities disappeared in this process. Yet, other central city neighborhoods and inner suburban cities survived, reorganized and developed new social niches in the metropolitan community. These places maintained strong local civic institutions that created an appealing sense of community. This sense of community translated into stable residentially viability. Residents remained over the long haul, housing stock were maintained and enhanced, property values outperformed surrounding areas, and local businesses thrived.

What are the elements of social capital that help hold current residents, and attract new neighborhood citizens? Urbanist Jane Jacobs advocated specific physical aspects of urban neighborhoods that encourage social interaction and long term residency: short-walkable blocks, mixes of old and new buildings, and varieties of economic activities. As Jacobs saw it, a

neighborhood can generate this kind of diversity by the presence of and interactions among four different factors: 1) that the community is used for multiple commercial and residential purposes 2) that it contains short blocks, so that “opportunities to turn corners” are frequent. This is the essence of both ‘walkability’ in a community and of opportunity for social interaction among neighbors; 3) buildings that vary in age and condition, with a good proportion of older buildings and 4) dense concentration of people.

These elements comprise part of the social capital of a community. Jacobs rejects zoning schemes that segregate city neighborhoods by function. Ideally, there will be a mix of residences and businesses on the same streets. Having buildings of mixed age and condition is advantageous since buildings all of one age and condition (particularly new construction) bias the neighborhood toward a limited set of high-end or established uses. Residential density, considered both as population density and density of residences, is important to providing a residential base for local businesses in the community. Finally, the opportunity to turn corners makes for friendlier street life. Multiple routes increase the opportunity for commercial activity and the likelihood of “across use,” i.e., people using the same street for different purposes.

Expanding on these ideas, contemporary researchers argue that parks, churches, coffee shops and bars, all provide community conditions that foster strong civic ties and residential longevity, aspects they refer to as the social capital of community. Such elements have tangible positive outcomes for residents that further reinforce community viability. Examining urban poverty, unemployment, control of crime, education, and other issues, social scientists have discovered that successful outcomes are more likely in civically engaged communities. These researchers have highlighted the role of community institutions in facilitating mutual trust and cooperation between local residents as conditions necessary for social and economic stability.

The role of public spaces and civically-engaging institutions has likewise been noted in the accumulation of the neighborhood-based social capital that communities can draw on to solve their problems and reach their goals. This suggests that a presence of a stable core of long-term residents increases rates of participation in religious activities. Small businesses including retail places have been conceptualized as another component of the social “glue” that links neighbors together and to their community. Informal meeting places -- pubs, drugstores, coffee shops and restaurants, beauty parlors, barber shops and grocery stores -- maintain institutional basis for informal public life between the workplace and the home and facilitate inter-generational connections, social support and neighborhood unity. In this regard, small retail establishments, or “third places”, are similar to churches and local associations: they create opportunities for civic engagement to happen. Clearly, local associations, churches and “third places” promote civic engagement and thus play a crucial role in the accumulation of social capital of communities. This study applies these ideas to the rezoning of a small community in Pittsburghs inner suburbs.

The Borough of Dormont (pop. 9,305) borders the City of Pittsburgh to the southwest. At 74 square miles it has the highest population density of any municipality in Allegheny County. Dormont is one of 130 municipalities in Allegheny County, the majority of which are small boroughs and towns with declining population. A unique feature about Dormont in comparison to other Pittsburgh suburbs is that it is a self-contained community with its own downtown and residential neighborhoods. The Borough is described as having: a downtown and commercial districts; mature, established neighborhoods; a significant number of historic structures located

within both neighborhoods and commercial districts; access to public transportation, and, an exemplary system of community and neighborhood parks

The region is in decline as a whole, however an out-migration is clearly occurring. One of the surrounding counties did have a population increase (Butler County). Within Allegheny County, only one-quarter of the municipalities increased their population during the 1990's and most of those communities lie at the County's outer border on the north, west and southwest. Four municipalities in particular had growth rates of 25% or more. In addition, 34% of people moving out of the county between 2003 and 2004 moved to other parts of the Pittsburgh region. Sprawl exacts a high price in terms of its social, economic, environmental and health impacts. To reverse sprawl we must focus on creating attractive first ring communities to get people to move back in to the urban areas.

In a town like Dormont, which isn't able to tax businesses, its only real possibility of increasing revenue is to attract higher wage earners. These people tend to be "knowledge workers" who, research has shown, are attracted to "authentic neighborhoods" but with modern conveniences. Unfortunately, old zoning requirements and building codes that fit suburbs create disincentives to renovate existing structures/areas. Antiquated codes and ordinances allow strip malls and parking lots to proliferate where neighborhood businesses once stood. Small local governments are attracted to the short term perceived tax gains from this type of development while letting their inherent historical and social assets, and therefore their main attraction, be destroyed.

Much of the language and zoning infrastructure is still in place from when Dormont was a different borough in a different time. Dormont's zoning code still actively requires new businesses to provide ample parking areas in a town that was designed and planned prior to the automobile. Dormont's zoning ordinances are inefficiently organized, confusing, internally inconsistent, do not provide regulations that adequately address current community issues and do not fit the needs of today's society. These flaws inevitably cause many problems for users.

Community interaction and participation in the planning process is a key aspect to the solution, and it needs to happen at the neighborhood level. Dormont is small enough to provide a testing ground for such an intensive, neighborhood level participatory planning process.

Zoning has primarily been utilized as a tool to separate residential areas from the noise and pollution associated with industrial plants, steel mills, as such. The best way for a city to regulate land use has been through strict zoning ordinances. Ordinances such as building set back distances, parking requirements, and property use were established to protect communities and their residents. However, technology and economic restructuring, among other things, has led to many changes in communities leaving traditional zoning as an outmoded land use policy that is sorely in need of change. Zoning has such a great impact on a community and affects anything from commercial development budgets, residential development, buildings, and bureaucrats. As time and technology changed, often the zoning regulations still governed, and often times restricted, the transformations of communities. This is the case with the Borough of Dormont. Effective zoning ordinances require looking into the future as well as letting go of the past, while at the same time juggling neighborhoods, new technology, the environment, new demographics, politicians and progress. Current zoning methods do not respect community history nor treat them as dynamic entities that are in need of regular change. Instead, they tend

to stifle the change and much needed growth of these older communities due to technology, consumer preferences, and changes in society.

At a practical level, Dormont's zoning tends to foster development patterns that conflict with smart growth objectives while using a process objectionable to free market conditions. It restricts densities of projects that may have a market for a greater density, it prevents mixed land uses even though that may be the preferred design, and it requires parking ratios that assume most residents or customers will drive most places. With this type of zoning regulation, it should not be surprising that much of Dormont, looks disjointed and aesthetically challenged.

Recognizing the shortcomings of traditional zoning, the Dormont Borough Council and administration has been actively seeking alternatives. The City's response to these changes has been to undertake a systematic process which involves analysis of the community, citizen participation, and revision of the Borough's zoning ordinances. The revised zoning ordinances will provide for the orderly development of the City, assist the community in its effort to maintain and enhance a pleasant living environment, and suit the anticipated Borough needs for the future. The Duquesne University research team took a unique and uncustomary approach to redesigning the Borough's zoning ordinances. They began with the assumption that individual land uses, neighborhoods, and communities are dynamic and constantly evolving as society, technology, and preferences change. The research team looked at zoning ordinances based on the market place and community as well as promoting sustainability and protecting the environment relative to specific population groups.

This study assessed community elements that best maximize sustainable community social conditions, identifies areas and segments for the community that would benefit most from changes in zoning, and develops inventories of social capital and related maps to facilitate citizen input into future zoning policies.

A critical element in this evaluation was the use of GIS to produce maps of the social, demographic, economic, political, physical, and built environment of Dormont. These maps will integrate publicly available data with Dormont data bases to assess land use, zoning and social processes throughout the Borough. From these maps, student teams will evaluate Dormont's current social landscape through Stakeholder interviews and on the ground observations of pedestrian patterns, neighborhood social interactions, traffic patterns and other daily activities. These patterns were then coded and incorporated into maps and data bases to form a Community Inventory.

This Community Inventory compiled Dormont's current social capital and identifies levels of social capital across Dormont's landscape. A major product of the social maps and corresponding research teams efforts, this inventory identified socially valued elements, such as walkable neighborhoods, architecturally valued buildings and streets, etc. are high. By the same token, this inventory identified locations where such civically engaging characteristics require enhancement. A major product of this part of the process was to identify those elements of Dormont's environment that may be enhanced through rezoning efforts, and to identify the major stakeholders affected by this rezoning.

*Rezoning for Older Residents:* This team combined analyses of Census data (by block-group focusing on older populations and health limitation), combined this with evaluation of streets

mapping, of health facilities and business location, as well as through direct observation to arrive at their conclusions: Dormont's elderly has adequate access to higher order health facilities, but poor access to general health services. The major barriers to these lower order providers are 1) busy roads coupled with pedestrian unfriendly lights, and 2) poor sidewalks. Specific changes suggested include 3) retiming traffic lights. They suggest using trolley transportation to local businesses and refurbishing sidewalks as well as mixing health related commercial activities in areas populated by older citizens.

*Rezoning for Public Safety and Civic Conditions:* This team focused on the location of crime in Dormont and its relationship to three aspects of the built environment 1) street length and associated social characteristics, 2) residential density and 3) business location. Their observations suggest that the presence of community based businesses, of short walk-able blocks and of higher residential population density are a deterrent to crime. Each aspect increases 'eyes on the street' that is likely to decrease the opportunity to commit certain types of crimes. Their work further identifies specific 'gray areas' in Dormont which feel unsafe and are areas where crime is more likely to occur. These areas are prime targets for rezoning to mixed business & residential.

*Rezoning for Families with Children:* This team focused on zoning issues in relationship to families and children. Specifically, they used Census data to evaluate Dormont's housing, educational and civic conditions relative to the two other municipalities that share this school district. Finding that the highest concentrations of families with children are in Dormont, they supplemented their secondary analysis with interviews with a local long term resident, and with observational studies of the advantages of this community. Their conclusion stress the benefits of street life and small businesses on tangible social outcomes and recommend the extension of mixed zoning to other Dormont neighborhoods as a mechanism to build ongoing, sustainable civic conditions.

Currently these aspects are being considered for incorporation into the Dormont Rezoning Plan. The revised zoning ordinances will provide for the orderly development of the City, assist the community in its effort to maintain and enhance a pleasant living environment, and suit the anticipated Borough needs for the future. The university research team is assisting in the redesigning the Borough's zoning ordinances, based on citizen input from the Social Maps and Social Capital Inventory Produced in Phase I. The research team will look at zoning ordinances that will be based on the market place and community as well as promoting sustainability and protecting the environment. As part of the process the Duquesne University research team will develop feedback instruments from data developed in Phase I. Data from these instruments will assist Dormont's government in transforming the existing zoning ordinances into a more understandable, streamlined, defensible and effective plan implementation tool.