



**CHAPTER 6: MAKING GREAT
NEIGHBORHOODS HAPPEN
– IT TAKES EVERYONE
WORKING TOGETHER**

So far, we've seen that great neighborhoods include a wide range of housing types for many different households, and that neighborhoods include places like shops and civic buildings, as well as homes. We learned how the different pieces fit together to make a Great Neighborhood. And we learned how the "rules" that govern land development can be written to promote them.

Well then, why aren't there more Great Neighborhoods being created? Making them happen is not easy. Inertia is not on Great Neighborhoods' side: developers, public officials, and citizens often have little experience or understanding of them. Zoning and subdivision rules generally hamper the development of key elements, such as narrower streets or mixed uses. Financial institutions tend to be reluctant to provide financing for complex development packages. Schools and churches may have site-development guidelines that require large amounts of land for new facilities, making Great Neighborhood principles very challenging to implement.

Overcoming these and other hurdles requires people to work together. When citizens, developers, public officials, local organizations, and financial institutions understand the value of Great Neighborhoods and play their parts to make them happen, then Great Neighborhoods – and great cities, villages, towns, and regions – can be created.

THE DEAL-MAKERS: WHAT'S IN IT FOR DEVELOPERS, BUILDERS, FINANCIERS, AND REALTORS?

Ordinary citizens can advocate and speak out on Great Neighborhood issues, but they can't build them. With very rare exception, our built environment – both the good and the bad – is created by private-sector real estate developers, constructed by private-sector builders, financed by private-sector investors, and marketed by private-sector realtors. So, it would be nice if there were developers, builders, investors, and realtors out there who would be willing to produce Great Neighborhoods simply because they are committed to the principles of sound, sustainable neighborhood design. And certainly there are many such people in Dane County. But for Great Neighborhoods to happen, principled people are not enough. The private sector needs to see the potential profits of tapping into the growing market for Great Neighborhoods.

Luckily for supporters of Great Neighborhoods, there is demand, and they are profitable ventures. This means that getting the private-sector real estate community to become more active is a matter of education (most developers, builders, investors, and realtors have no experience with anything but conventional suburbia) and promoting best practices within each profession.

Developers and realtors can work with neighborhood groups, citizens, and local plan commissions to communicate the Great Neighborhood elements of their proposals. They can document the safety and serviceability of narrower streets, and the economic benefits of great neighborhoods. They can advocate for zoning reform that implements Great Neighborhood (i.e., TND) development districts.

Furthermore, nothing succeeds like success. New Great Neighborhoods and refurbished older ones provide models that marketers and developers can look to when considering the viability of the next new Great Neighborhood. Financial successes will convince lenders and



underwriters that the Great Neighborhoods model is a secure investment. The object-at-rest inertia that currently restrains development of Great Neighborhoods will become an equally powerful object-in-motion inertia as the successes of Great Neighborhoods become better understood.

Those who make their livings on real-estate development always favor the tried-and-true, because it is the conservative, risk-averse, reliable investment. Luckily, it only takes one maverick to build the first new Great Neighborhood. Then, this new neighborhood model becomes as “tried-and-true” as any conventional, large-lot, single-use subdivision.

GETTING PUBLIC OFFICIALS ON BOARD

There is an old urban planning dictum which goes, basically: “Whatever it is that you want to see built, make that the easiest thing to build.” Today, many city planners understand the value of Great Neighborhoods principles, and many want to see more development that fits those patterns, but existing codes ensure that conventional development on the urban fringe remains the easiest thing to do. Only highly specialized firms deal with downtown projects, brownfield reclamation, neighborhood developments, and so forth.

In order to get the private sector to more actively pursue Great Neighborhood projects, city planners need to examine the rules they have adopted through their zoning and subdivision ordinances, and identify obstacles to the creation or rehabilitation of Great Neighborhoods. They can amend their zoning codes to adopt TND zoning districts that establish new rules making it possible to develop Great Neighborhoods. They can incorporate Great Neighborhoods principles into their comprehensive and neighborhood plans.

City planners are not the only ones who set the rules of development. Transportation engineers, public works engineers, and other technician-officials can help identify ways their professional objectives can be met, yet still create, walkable, compact, and diverse neighborhoods. They can work with planners and developers to rethink rules that primarily accommodate automobile use, infrastructure provision policies that are not cost-effective, and other land-development rules that block Great Neighborhoods.

Other public officials have tangential roles in setting the rules for land use, but they can have equally profound impacts on whether or not Great Neighborhoods happen. School officials, for example, can modify site design guidelines for new schools to reduce the required acreages. This would allow elementary schools to be located in Great Neighborhoods, and middle and high schools to be located on the borders of neighborhoods. Site guidelines could also ensure that new schools are within walking distance of many homes, and that the sites can be easily accessed by foot and bicycle.

Building inspectors also have a role. They can identify and reform code provisions that effectively penalize rehabilitation projects. Many building codes require all construction projects to adhere to new construction standards. For rehab projects, this level of code compliance can render a project economically infeasible. Wisconsin and many other states have adopted Historic Building Codes that protect public safety while allowing greater flexibility for rehabilitation projects. Owners of qualified historic buildings in Wisconsin may elect to use the Historic Building Code in lieu of any prevailing code provided the issue is included in the Historic Building Code.

Other public officials should also be involved in making Great Neighborhoods happen. Fire departments and sanitation departments should work with others to meet both safety requirements and create Great Neighborhoods streets. Grant-making officers for programs such as the Community Development Block Grant and others should favor projects and efforts that promote Great Neighborhoods. And, of course, mayors and other elected representatives are in positions of influence to change assumptions about land development, affect municipal priorities, and otherwise promote old and new Great Neighborhoods.

GREAT NEIGHBORHOODS AND COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING

Wisconsin's 1999 Comprehensive Planning Law (also known as the "Smart Growth Law") is one of Wisconsin's primary tools for creating both regional cooperation and Great Neighborhoods. The law requires that by 2010, most Wisconsin municipalities complete a comprehensive plan that addresses a range of planning concerns: issues and opportunities, housing, transportation, utilities and public facilities, economic development, cultural resources, agricultural resources, natural resources, intergovernmental cooperation, land use, and implementation.

The law also requires that all cities and villages over 12,500 people adopt a traditional neighborhood development (TND) zoning ordinance. Although there is no requirement to map TNDs, having a TND zoning ordinance on the books means that a developer who is interested in doing a TND need only apply for a single zoning variance, rather than trying to bend a series of existing statutes and regulations to allow the creation of a Great Neighborhood.

In addition, the law requires that municipalities which accept state funding to complete their plans (approximately 80 percent of plans currently underway are state-funded) must meet 14 criteria for "smart" planning. Almost all of these directly address the concerns of Great Neighborhoods.

These criteria call for the designation of "smart growth" areas – places where a municipality wants to encourage infill development, or undeveloped areas where it makes sense to encourage new development. In effect, this is a requirement that municipalities designate where new and infill Great Neighborhoods should be sited.

The law further calls for the promotion of development of land with existing infrastructure and services – including historic redevelopment – and it calls for ensuring that new growth will have sufficient new infrastructure, and that new development be out so as to increase efficiencies and decrease public-sector costs. Great Neighborhoods achieve all of these.

The law also calls for multi-modal transportation systems. It requires municipalities to encourage neighborhood designs that support transportation choices, and to provide mobility to all citizens, including transit-dependent and disabled people. It also calls for the provision of an adequate supply of housing for residents at all income levels.

Another Great Neighborhoods principle that the Comprehensive Planning Law promotes is a sense of place. The law calls for building community identity by revitalizing "main streets" and using design standards; preserving cultural, historic, and archaeological sites; and creating and/or preserving unique urban and rural communities.



Finally, the law calls for the conservation and protection of non-urban scenic and economic resources. It requires that municipalities act to protect natural areas and resources, and to protect economically productive non-urban areas such as farms and forests. This, too, is a goal that Great Neighborhoods can help achieve through land conservation and through simply reducing the demand for land by instituting compact development.

PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

Local governments usually establish Plan Commissions to review new developments or changes to existing development. Typically, the people who attend and get involved in Plan Commission meetings are those with a vested interest in the outcome of a decision. These often include the developer and nearby property owners. Often, the role of neighbors is reduced to anti-development “NIMBYism” (“not in my backyard”), because they have not been involved in planning for changes until after the fact.



Neighborhood organizations can get involved in proactive ways by taking strong roles in neighborhood planning and in municipality-wide comprehensive planning. These plans lay out visions for how the community will look and function in the near and long-term future. The plans serve as guideposts for future decision-making. Unlike comprehensive planning, neighborhood planning is not required under Wisconsin law, but it is an effective tool for guiding future change at the neighborhood scale. Neighborhood groups should work to ensure that their plans are officially incorporated into comprehensive plans.

Citizen involvement can work well when citizen organizations talk with developers in the early stages of development proposals. Through early communication, citizens and developers can work out development options that are mutually beneficial before they get to the more formal design, permitting, and political processes, where interactions can become polarized and confrontational.

Mere involvement in the planning process, however, is not sufficient. To make sure plans are followed, neighborhood residents need to *stay* involved in neighborhood development issues. If citizen participation in the planning process is effective, local residents will feel a sense of ownership over the plans.

MAKING COMMUNITIES MORE WALKABLE

Many neighborhoods have barriers to walking. Heavy and fast auto traffic deters people from crossing streets or even walking along them. A lack of nearby destinations removes any reason to walk or bike. And when all of these conspire to keep pedestrians off the streets, the lack of foot-traffic in itself becomes a disincentive for people to walk.



One way to increase walkability of a neighborhood is to conduct a “walking audit.” A walking audit is a checklist that measure the pedestrian-friendliness of a neighborhood by examining the condition of sidewalks, design of streets and intersections, how many destinations are within walking distance of most homes, and so forth. The audits are used to prioritize improvements needed to make the area more conducive to walking. Once citizens have established a walkability priority list, they can work with the local government or other entities to improve conditions.

Another way that citizens can make street crossing safer in Dane County is to establish a pedestrian flag crossing program. Sponsored by The Safe Community Coalition of Madison and Dane County and ActiveForLife, the pedestrian flag crossing program places baskets of small red flags on either side of an intersection on a busy street at points where pedestrians feel the need to cross. Local residents get trained to use the flags to signal to drivers that they are crossing, and to let the drivers know to yield to the pedestrian in the crosswalk.

Children walking to school is one of the best ways to put life out on the sidewalks. **In 1960, half of children in the U.S. walked to school. Today only about one out of ten kids walk to school.**²³ Many parents are now concerned about their children crossing busy streets, or they fear dangers due to deserted streets. Parents joining their children provides a potential solution, but the same concerns often remain (and this solution only works up until a certain age). By working with each other and with schools, parents can share walking with kids to school, advocate for crossing guards, and create an atmosphere that says, “It’s safe to walk to school.”

GETTING LOCAL GROUPS INVOLVED

In order for local citizens to want to get involved in promoting existing or new Great Neighborhoods, groups need to consider what they stand to gain from them. There is nothing cynical about taking a “What’s in it for us?” stance on the issue, particularly because Great Neighborhoods have so much to offer so many groups.

Seniors stand to gain much from Great Neighborhood designs. As people age they depend more on non-automobile forms of transportation and often use walking as a way to stay physically active and healthy; therefore, they benefit disproportionately from close proximity to parks and local stores. Living in Great Neighborhoods also allows seniors to keep involved in community life, unlike the case when they are isolated in elderly-only developments.

Organizations representing seniors can help educate their members about Great Neighborhoods and inform them of how they can get involved in related local planning and development issues. For example, seniors can work with neighborhood organizations to communicate demand for local stores (such as pharmacies) within walking distance from homes. They can advocate for safer crossings at key intersections. And they can communicate to developers the importance of integrating senior-housing into Great Neighborhoods – instead of siting it in car-dependent isolation.

Accessible transportation is an essential part of independence for people with disabilities. In compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, Great Neighborhoods should make every effort to remove physical barriers from buildings, streets and sidewalks and offer as many transportation options as possible.



Another group that gains from Great Neighborhoods – again, because they depend on non-car transportation opportunities – are young people. The ability to safely walk or bike to friends houses, parks, schools, and stores means a higher level of independence for people under the driving age (and for their parents). Access to safe places to play and hang out in the community also provides a relief valve for the feelings of isolation and alienation that many suburban youths describe.

Youth organizations are beginning to realize that young people provide essential – and totally unique – perspectives on planning and development issues. Yet such perspectives are typically under-represented at planning forums. Young people can be engaged through their schools, extracurricular activities, and community groups to explore Great Neighborhoods ideas. Youth groups (and their adult coordinators) can actively lobby to be involved in local planning decisions. And students, teachers, and school officials – as well as parents – can speak out in favor of school-siting policies that follow Great Neighborhoods principles.

Increasingly, public health organizations and advocacy groups are realizing that there is a link between land use and physical activity. A sedentary lifestyle in which cars are the only means of transportation is simply unhealthy. Research completed by the Centers for Disease Control²⁴ clearly demonstrates the connection between a lack of opportunities to walk or bike, on one hand, and our national epidemic of obesity (and particularly childhood obesity) on the other. Physical activity is an inevitable and positive side-effect of Great Neighborhoods design, and it contributes to public health. This is both an absolute benefit for society and a cost-saving boon for the health-care system. Such organizations should educate their members about Great Neighborhoods principles, and get involved in efforts and discussions to demonstrate the health benefits of more walkable and bikable communities.

Religious organizations – including both houses of worship and lay groups – historically understood the connection between healthy communities, Great Neighborhoods principles, and their own moral and social values. Because its parishes are not movable, the Catholic Church in particular has long been a champion of sustainable neighborhood principles. Too often, however, expanding congregations of virtually all denominations seek out large sites on the edges of urban areas, seeking cheap land, easy vehicular accessibility, and large parking lots. But they do so at the cost of removing religious institutions from the social context of neighborhoods, and of making walking to them impossible.

Concerned leaders and congregants should consider whether they should be guided by the civic and cultural values of Great Neighborhoods, or by the real-estate logic of conventional suburban development. In many cases, there are neighborhood- and community-friendly options for relocation or expansion that still meet their facility needs. On a broader level, congregations can be a forum to discuss the concepts that underpin Great Neighborhoods, to organize an active presence in community and comprehensive planning processes, and to get involved in local development issues.

The local police department, neighborhood watch groups, or other groups concerned with public safety also stand to gain from the implementation of Great Neighborhood principles. The enhanced public and civic life associated with Great Neighborhoods creates what planners call “eyes on the street.” That is to say, when people watch out for their neighbors, crime simply has fewer opportunities to happen. Also, Great Neighborhoods create quality



public spaces (including sidewalks and streets as well as parks and squares) where kids and teens can congregate and play legitimately, in contrast to the marginal spaces where young people congregate in typical suburban settings – behind buildings, in unused lots, and so forth. In this way, Great Neighborhoods make the task of supervising them both more efficient and less intrusive.

There are many other groups that stand to benefit from the implementation of Great Neighborhoods principles. A few among these include: affordable housing advocates, school bus companies, environmentalists, farm advocates, transit advocates, and preservationists. The list goes on and on.

As more and more citizens begin to grasp that Great Neighborhoods are not only in their interest, but that building them is *possible*, the voices advocating for them will grow in numbers and volume.

IN SHORT ...

Recognizing that Great Neighborhoods are worth preserving and creating is only the first step. Making them happen takes concerted efforts on the part of citizens, the private sector, and the public sector. Today, most of the mechanisms for developing land make it easiest to do conventional subdivisions and shopping malls at the urban fringe. The challenge before all of us is to steer all of that towards a more balanced situation, in which people who want to create and live in Great Neighborhoods have that choice.

