

Section VIII

Community Design

Overview

Town and village centers are critically important to communities. They are the centers of commerce. They are the places where residents and visitors seek and receive services. They are the places where neighbors plan to meet each other. Even more importantly, they are the places where people meet by chance, where they see each other informally and catch up on the comings and goings of the community.

These informal interactions, this running into friends and neighbors while going out to get the paper, or an ice cream, or a cup of coffee, lay the foundation for a healthy community.

Community design can accommodate and encourage these chance encounters. Villages have edges, like sidewalks, that define where it is safe to be a pedestrian, and places for people to sit. Rural areas and highways have neither. Land in villages is valuable, causing denser, more intense patterns of development. The buildings are close to the road. Their facades create a wall at the back edge of the sidewalk providing a frame, and a formality, to the village space. When that pattern is interrupted the overall appearance of the village center is lessened. Gaps in the edge impede the village's ability to provide the social functions noted above.

Sunapee Village

Sunapee Village once had a bustling Main Street, stretching just over a mile from the ferry docks and grand hotels in The Harbor to the meadows at the west end of Lower Main Street. Much of that has now changed. The grand hotels are gone. There are large boats, but they provide scenic tours, not the important connection to the rail station in Newbury that they formerly provided.

By far the biggest change came in the 1960s when Route 11 was relocated, improving traffic flow through the area, but effectively dividing The Harbor from the Lower Village, along Lower Main Street. Route 11 is an important and heavily travelled regional route. However, there are ways to enhance the road's community feel while carrying that traffic safely.

The NH Department of Transportation (NH DOT) and the United States Department of Transportation see their role in the design of highways going beyond vehicular movements and safety. Both departments recognize the tremendous impact a road's design can have on a community and have undertaken a program of Context Sensitive Design to blend roadways into community landscapes more effectively. While dealing with vehicular safety, they see their mission more broadly, including moving pedestrians and cyclists safely.

This chapter deals with all three aspects of Sunapee Village, identifying actions regarding the design elements in The Harbor and the Lower Village which are within the control of the town, and identifying improvements that should be made at the Route 11/Main Street Intersection in order to knit all of the pieces back into a whole.

The Harbor

Setbacks

The greenery near the gazebo and adjacent to the boat launch provide a pleasant park-like atmosphere near the lake. The Riverwalk serves as a connecting link between this area and the rest of The Village as the Harbor is the meeting and gathering area for residents and visitors

The bulk of the Harbor's structures are built very close to the back edge of the sidewalk. This is important. This façade edge is a defining element of the Harbor's character. Dense development occurred here because land was valuable. This minimal setback should be encouraged with any future development.

The sketch plan that has been developed for the new Abbot Library reflects this design. The building is close to the sidewalk, with parking to the rear. This approach should be encouraged at other locations where development or redevelopment occurs. Figure 1 (See Appendix) shows a potential new building on the corner of Main Street and River Road. This sketch illustrates the way to re-enforce the historic development pattern in the Harbor.

To advance this design element it would be desirable to change the front setback requirement in the zoning ordinance which states that the setback is measured from the centerline of the right of way. This is unusual when compared with other communities. Because rights of way can be of varying widths, even along the same roadway, building setbacks are more typically measured as the distance between the front edge of the building parcel and the building itself.

Signs

There are many examples of well designed signs in the Harbor. Most of them are considerably smaller than the 48 square feet per side that is allowed in the zoning ordinance.

Signs are often sized to be readable by passing traffic. Given the slow moving traffic in the Harbor, a smaller size would be appropriate. It would be appropriate to consider recommending changes to the zoning ordinance to reduce the standards applicable in the Harbor.

At present the zoning ordinance is silent on the issue of electric or electronic signs. There are none in the Harbor. The Planning Board will consider ordinance changes to prohibit them in the future.

Building Height

Buildings in the Harbor are generally 2 to 3 stories in height, probably lower than the 40 foot limit specified in the zoning ordinance. A survey should be made to determine whether a lower limit on permitted heights should be adopted for the Harbor.

While height yields a village density, form is also important. Low flat roofed buildings do not read like a village. The town should consider adopting requirements for pitched roofs on all single story commercial buildings.

Recommendations – The Harbor

The Harbor is the heart of the community. It is the area that residents and visitors think of when they think of Sunapee. Having a new library in the Harbor will be an important reinforcement of the concept that this is the place where people meet and interact by chance. It will draw more activity into the area during all months of the year.

To preserve all of those good qualities, the Planning Board will take steps to:

- A1. Reduce the allowable sign area in the Harbor to reflect the smaller scale that is already there.
- B2. Prohibit electric/electronic signs from interfering with the character of the Harbor.
- C3. Lower the 40 foot maximum building height and develop standards to require pitched roofs on one story commercial buildings.

The Harbor is an attractive, historic gem that needs to be preserved. Its scale is just about right.

Route 11/Main Street Intersection

This intersection is a problem that needs to be fixed. It appears to function reasonably well for the 8,000 to 10,000 vehicles that pass along Route 11 daily, but, from a community perspective, divides the Harbor from the Lower Village. From a pedestrian perspective, it is an unsafe and uninviting area.

There are two broad issues that must be dealt with in order to weave the Village back into a whole: speed and appearance.

Speed

There is nothing to suggest to drivers traveling between New London or Interstate 89 and Newport or Claremont that this intersection is anything other than more open roadway. The downhill approaches to the Sugar River bridge and the curving alignment of the roadway, that keeps the intersection out of view for a considerable part of the approach from the west, contribute to increases in travel speed in this section.

Route 11 is posted at 30 miles per hour through the intersection. The blinking yellow light at the intersection does little to slow traffic down, and no other design features suggest to drivers that they should not be moving at 50 miles an hour or more. In order for traffic to be slowed down, the roadway and the abutting properties must look and feel like a village center.

Traffic Calming

Within the right of way, there are a variety of design features that would gain a driver's attention and slow traffic down... narrowing the pavement and shoulder width by introducing curbed sidewalks, inserting islands and pedestrian bump outs, gateway signage, landscaping and lighting.

A driver should begin to notice that things are changing on the approach to the actual intersection. Banners, trees, and welcoming signs all give clues that circumstances are changing.

Intersection Design

The intersection should be redesigned to give both physical and visual clues to drivers that they need to slow down as they approach. The pavement of Route 11 is too wide to give pedestrians (or crossing vehicles) a feeling of comfort or safety.

Figure 2 (See Appendix) shows one approach to a new design. It narrows the road surface by narrowing the shoulders, and by adding raised islands within the approaches to provide visual cues to drivers to slow down.

The islands and narrower pavement will serve the needs of drivers on Route 11 traveling at 30 miles per hour. They will also make the intersection much safer for pedestrians and crossing traffic, with less total distance to cross, and the islands will provide a safe haven where pedestrians can wait for the second lane of traffic to clear. Landscaping is added to add a visual statement that says "This is a village cross roads, not the open highway."

It appears from drawings on record with the NH DOT that all of this work could be done within the existing right of way.

Figure 3 (See Appendix) shows a more extensive re-working of the intersection with a roundabout. Roundabouts have recently been installed, with safety and traffic calming benefits, in New London, Meredith, Hanover, Concord and Nashua.

Roundabouts are designed to move traffic without stops and to slow it down. The illustration introduces curbed islands in the approaches and definitive crosswalk locations. It appears that it might require some property acquisition at the Sugar River Savings Bank, and a reconfiguring of the parking in front of the Abbott Library.

NH DOT, as time and money permit, is working with local communities to improve the highways of the state as community assets. The town should apply to DOT to improve the intersection of Route 11 and Main Street as one of its high priorities.

Appearance

The roadway design and the appearance of both the right of way and the abutting properties do convey a message to drivers. Wide straight roadways, with no curbing at the edges and lots of asphalt all say “this is the open road”, and convey a sense that faster travel is acceptable. A narrower road, more crowded, denser development, and even building design can convey a sense of the village, a place where traffic will have to slow down to accommodate the unexpected. The Planning Board is committed to exploring a variety of these design features.

Gateways

Gateways let drivers know they are entering a place, rather than driving along between places. They help to define where conditions are different, where driving behavior needs to change.

The sign to the right is a typical informational sign. It is in the wrong location for a gateway sign.

Gateway signs should be big and bold and well cared for (freshly painted and nicely landscaped). They should be readable from points of approach, say 1,500 feet from the place they are designed to identify. They should say “This is our Place and we are Proud of It!”

Gateway signs have recently been installed on Route 11 and on Route 103 B on the approaches to the Village.

Road Edge

On the west side of the road there is a sidewalk in front of the Sugar River Savings Bank, but it dies out pretty rapidly. It should connect all the way up to Sargent Road. On the east side of the road, there is a small asphalt island in front of the library, but it is too narrow and inaccessible to qualify as a sidewalk. A continuous sidewalk should be provided on both sides of the roadway with curbing along the road edge.

Figures 2 and 3 show opportunities for new landscaping and planting. Private property owners along the roadway should continue this trend. Trees, street lighting, banners or flags which create a vertical edge help to slow down traffic by alerting drivers that there is a change of environment from open road to village center.

Curb cuts have no road edge. Driveways that front on Route 11 are subject to driveway permits from NH DOT. Some are over wide. The Town should work with the Department and the property owners to narrow as many as possible. Proposals for new development or changes in use provide opportunities to modify existing driveways. The Town should cooperate with NH DOT so that future driveways conform with what the Master Plan proposes in this area.

Building Placement/Shape

Along the highway, there is less need for the intensity of development of a village center, and more need for parking and on-site traffic circulation. The Sugar River Bank building is an example of how to accommodate both aesthetics and traffic circulation; its front yard is landscaped and traffic moves to the rear. The Planning Board will continue to encourage this pattern of development.

Another pleasing aspect of this building is that, as a one story building, it has a pitched roof. The Planning Board will develop regulations so as to require pitched roofs on one story commercial buildings around the intersection. Single story buildings with flat roofs speak of the open road and strip commercial development. Pitched roofs will assist in the effort to promote a village feel in this area,.

Signs

Wood or wood-appearing material says in-town location. Plastic and steel say the highway. The Planning Board will develop new sign standards both for in-town and out-of-town locations along Route 11. Regulations will be developed to restrict electric/electronic signs in the in-town locations, as they convey more of a feeling of the open road, and less of that of a traditional village.

Green Space

Villages have density, but they also have parks, sometimes large and often very small. Some of the properties in the intersection area are nicely landscaped. Others are not.

At the Chamber of Commerce information booth, Route 103 B has become much wider than it needs to be and the parking lot could be smaller and still accommodate the traffic that stops there. Figures 2 and 3 show some potential landscaping opportunities for this area. The Town will work with the Chamber of Commerce and NH DOT to improve the intersection and the parking lot.

Recommendations – Route 11/Main Street Intersection

Forty years ago, people saw a traffic problem along Route 11 as it passed through Sunapee. Unfortunately, the solution had unintended consequences for the Village. Fortunately, those consequences can be reversed while maintaining the safety and convenience of the public traveling on Route 11.

To correct the situation, the Town will coordinate with NH DOT to make the intersection safer, with more of a village feel to it. The Town will request that NH DOT:

- B1. Redesign the intersection to include:
 - Narrowing the paved surface;

- Introducing traffic islands;
- Adding more, and better placed, crosswalks;
- Adding more landscaping within the intersection area;
- Proceeding to a full roundabout design or other suitable traffic-calming intersection design.

B2. Create more definition to the roadway's edge by:

- Installing sidewalks and curbing on both sides of the roadway from west of Route 103B to Sargent Road;
- Planting trees in the right of way;
- Providing pedestrian scale lighting in and around the intersection;
- Narrowing existing curb cuts; and

Further, the Town will:

B3. Encourage existing property owners to provide additional landscaping.

B4. Change the Site Plan regulations to require parking to the side and rear of commercial buildings and landscaping in the front, where possible

B5. Require pitched roofs on single story commercial buildings.

B6. Revise the sign regulations to provide more of a village and less of a highway feel in this area, and to prohibit electric/electronic signs.

B7. Encourage reducing the size of the parking area and providing more attractive landscaping around the Information Center.

Lower Main Street

The Sugar River is a real treasure along Lower Main Street. The presence of the Methodist Church, the two public schools, and the playing fields at the Middle/High school lend vitality to this area. However, the disconnection of Lower Main Street from the Harbor by Route 11 makes the area feel isolated.

The intersection improvements recommended above and the extension of the Riverwalk into this area, adjacent to the Sugar River or visually connected to it, will help to reconnect Lower Main Street to the Harbor .

Building Placement/Size

By definition, villages are more densely developed than rural areas. And such is the case on Lower Main Street. Although not as tightly developed as the Harbor, there is a rhythm to the buildings. They frame the street, not at the immediate back edge of the sidewalk as in the Harbor, but generally on the order of 25 feet from the edge of the right of way. This setback should continue to be encouraged to maintain the existing "edge."

The tallest buildings here are 2.5 to 3 stories, lower than the 40 feet of overall height that is permitted by the zoning ordinance. The current zoning standard should be reduced so that future building heights closely match existing building heights. And, as in the Harbor and the Route 11 intersection areas of the Village, single story commercial structures should have pitched roofs, so as to blend in with the rest of the architecture along Lower Main Street.

Safety/Sidewalks

There is a continuous curbed sidewalk along the south side of Lower Main Street from the Route 11 intersection to North Road. This is both a safety feature and supports the effort to give definition to the edge of the right of way and the character of a village.

A sidewalk should also be installed on the north side between Route 11 and School Street, the same side of the road as the schools.

Both sidewalks, with curbs, should eventually be extended west to Route 11 to give passing drivers on Route 11 a visual clue that there is a village in the valley below. The curbing and sidewalks along Lower Main Street would indicate that slower speeds and pedestrian traffic are encouraged there.

Parking

Parking arrangements in this area appear to be fairly hap-hazard. Most of the buildings are on relatively large lots. The attractiveness of the area would be enhanced if vehicles are required to be parked at the side or rear of commercial and multi-family buildings, rather than in the front yards.

Signs

As in the Harbor, signs along Lower Main Street appear to be smaller than the 48 square foot size permitted in the zoning ordinance. Small signs are appropriate for this area with its slower moving traffic. Changes to the zoning standards should be made to match new signs to the nature and type of the existing signage along Lower Main Street.

Riverwalk

The Sugar River along Lower Main Street is a major public asset. Extending the Riverwalk as a link between the Harbor, Lower Main Street and any new activity in the meadows to the west is an important way to knit the parts of the Village back together. In some areas the Riverwalk may provide physical access to the river. In other areas there may only be visual access. The Town should make extending the Riverwalk a high priority.

Administration/Zoning

Not all of Lower Main Street is zoned within the Village District. As improvements are made to enhance various elements of Lower Main Street (extending the sidewalks, extending the Riverwalk) and to connect it to the Harbor (re-configuring the Route 11 intersection), the zoning boundaries should be changed so that all of Lower Main Street lies within the Village District.

Recommendations – Lower Main Street

Lower Main Street is an area of classic New England architecture. The isolation of this section of town from the rest of the Village was an unforeseen consequence of re-routing Route 11. The improvements recommended for the Route 11 Intersection are an important step in re-connecting the two parts.

The Town should take these actions to enhance Lower Main Street:

- C1. Revise the maximum permitted building heights to conform more closely with the existing buildings along Lower Main Street.
- C2. Require one story commercial buildings to have pitched roofs.
- C3. Install a curbed sidewalk along both sides of the street from Route 11 to North Road.
- C4. Require that parking be at the sides and rear of commercial and multi-family structures, where possible.
- C5. Adopt a village-scale sign standard that is consistent with existing signage.
- C6. Extend the Riverwalk into the area, whether it is able to provide a physical or only a visual connection to the Sugar River.
- C7. Revise the zoning to have Lower Main Street in the village districts.

Many of these elements are highlighted in Figure 4 (see Appendix).

Chapter Summary

Sunapee Village is a wonderful area. There were some unfortunate consequences of the Route 11 improvements in the 1960s. The town will coordinate with NH DOT regarding the community's objectives and the array of solutions that the department might make to mitigate them.

With respect to other activities, it is important that the Town adjust its zoning and other regulations to reinforce what is already in place in the Harbor and along Lower Main Street, to preserve their nature as a village. Villages have a pattern of development. Houses and other structures are close to the road, sometimes at the back edge of the sidewalk, some times a bit

further removed. The local ordinances should reflect that. And as noted above, signage and height standards should reflect what already exists.

