

Appendix B • Sierra Planning Directors' Survey: The Synopsis – October 2002



Architectural details contribute to a unique sense of place in our communities.

Introduction

This synopsis describes the results of interviews conducted by the Sierra Business Council (SBC) with Planning Directors throughout the Sierra Nevada in 2002. The survey was designed to elicit the local challenges and planning issues facing Sierra counties and towns and discuss innovative solutions that Planning Directors would find useful, particularly with regard to commercial and mixed use codes. Survey results led to our decision to develop this handbook. Our publication *Planning for Prosperity* documents many of the principles we believe will help maintain the historic charm and natural assets of our communities. The publication does not, however, provide detailed technical guidance for Planning Directors and local communities. This vacuum led SBC to embark on this effort to provide handbooks containing tools that address critical planning challenges facing Sierra communities.

Methodology

The interviews were conducted during the spring and summer of 2002 in person and over the telephone. Counties that participated include Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, El Dorado, Inyo, Lassen, Mariposa, Mono, Nevada, Placer, Plumas, Sierra, and Tuolumne, as well as the Truckee Meadows Regional Planning Agency and the towns of Truckee and Mammoth Lakes. This synopsis includes general findings that were interpreted from the interview responses. A draft shared with Planning Directors in early October of 2002 indicated that the interpretations were on point.

Overall Recommendations

- 1) Planning Directors understand that growth is inevitable in Sierra communities. The struggle is to maintain desirable community characteristics in the face of increasing population pressure and changing demographics. More effective policies and community leadership are needed to accommodate growth pressure.
- 2) Focusing development in our existing towns can preserve the open space and working landscapes that contribute to our quality of life and community character.
- 3) Due to a lack of resources, there is limited long-range planning. Innovation is being implemented not by policy, but one project at a time. We need to establish the policies and implementation tools to make it easier to “do the right thing.”
- 4) Design guidelines are increasingly important in the Sierra to ensure compatibility with the surrounding environment and the preservation of our rural character.
- 5) The commercial and mixed use districts discussed in this document serve as appropriate models for the types of commercial development found in the Sierra. However, each district varies depending on the local context and market demand.
- 6) Educational tools are critical to the success and acceptance of the model commercial zoning code. Sierra communities would benefit from photographs, videos, case studies, etc., to understand planning issues and solutions better.
- 7) It is important to establish a common vocabulary so that elected officials, stakeholders, developers, and the general public can better communicate desired visions and outcomes.

Responses are ordered from highest number of responses to lowest in the questions below.

1. *What are the biggest growth and development issues facing your county / town?*

- Maintaining the rural character of Sierra communities.
- Lack of infrastructure to accommodate proposed and projected developments.
- Providing affordable housing. In many of the foothill communities, retirement money and second-home construction are driving up the costs of land and housing with no relation to wage-earner income.
- Public perception of planning and political issues. Distrust of elected officials and the planning process.
- Not enough resources (planners) to implement and update general plans.
- Local developers are undercapitalized and closed to creativity and innovation. We need better models to assist developers in the Sierra communities.
- Main Street planning and connecting transportation and land-use decisions in Sierra communities.
- Dealing with large-scale resort development impacts and proposals.

2. *What innovative planning techniques or tools are you using to deal with this situation?*

- Identifying priority growth areas and prioritizing projects that will implement the General Plan's goals and objectives.
- Streamlining the approval process for quality development.

- Using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) as a tool for mapping existing development and determining where future development should occur.
- Requiring residential units above new retail and commercial developments.
- Implementing design guidelines or an architectural review program.
- Creating collaborative planning opportunities such as local and regional planning teams and public / private partnerships.

3. *What are the potential impacts if no proper and timely resolution is found?*

- If affordable housing is not provided, more people will have to migrate out from their job to find housing. This will increase traffic.
- Main Street highways become thoroughfares reducing the quality of the visitor travel experience and negatively impacting downtown retail.
- Rural sprawl.

4. *As a Planning Director, what information from other Sierra counties or towns would you find helpful?*

- A library or database of examples from both inside and outside the Sierra with proven strategies and successful projects that lead to quality growth and development.
- Model zoning ordinances and guidelines.
- Downtown parking management strategies.

5. *What planning implementation tools are you working on or updating now and what will you be working on over the next five years?*

- Sierra Nevada counties are undertaking a mix of new planning tools from general plan reviews and updates to new zoning ordinances. A few counties are looking at cluster options in subdivision ordinances, scenic highway designations, open space ordinances, lighting ordinances, and area plan updates. It is clear that counties use a variety of planning tools to implement their vision. Some counties acknowledged that their policies and regulations were prohibitive to innovative development and needed to be updated. Updated codes, ordinances, and guidelines can help ensure that new development builds upon local scale, patterns, and design.

Smart Growth Questions

6. *Do your policies promote efficient use of land?*

- Most planning policies in the Sierra promote efficient use of land. However, there are some barriers to implementation: single-use zoning, lack of infrastructure, and barriers to infill development.

7. *Are urban-service areas being used efficiently?*

- The majority of Planning Directors responded yes.

8. *Are there any coordinated development projects happening?*

- The majority of Planning Directors responded no.



9. *Does your general plan have excessive street design standards or excessive parking requirements?*

- State and local road design standards overemphasize automobiles. Sierra counties need to reduce road standards to better fit topography, provide for innovative projects and land uses, and create pedestrian friendly communities. Caltrans was seen as a barrier to innovative design.

10. *Do you have mixed use zoning?*

- The majority replied yes. Some allow residential as a permitted use in commercial zones.

11. *Do you have mixed use buildings?*

- The majority replied yes. But the design standards may overemphasize parking.

12. *Do you have mixed use streets and neighborhoods?*

- Yes and no. Planning Directors agreed there is a need for better understanding of mixed use projects and their regulations and development.

13. *Are there multiple transportation options in your county?*

- Yes, transportation options exist but are almost always heavily subsidized. Distances and physical barriers across the Sierra are too great to have efficient countywide transportation options.
- There is a need to plan for future transit stops.

- Many counties are struggling to maintain their local bus systems and must use innovative financing tools.

14. *Do you believe that street design standards overemphasize autos?*

- Yes, streets are built wide and provide few pedestrian amenities.

15. *Do you believe that your code emphasizes detailed, human-scale development?*

- No, zoning is outdated and makes it difficult to implement human-scale development. Past developments are the biggest problem regarding this issue because they are as far from human-scale design as possible.
- A design review committee exists in several communities. This is a growing trend that will assist in implementing human-scale development.
- We have single-use zoning, large lots, and wide street standards that discourage human-scale development.
- Human-scale design is addressed in general plan policy, but is not being implemented.

Commercial Code Questions

16. *Besides regulation of development, what do you think commercial zoning codes should achieve for a community?*

- Mixing of uses, such as residential, office, and retail.
- Economic development, revitalization, and infill.

- Compatible design.
- Pedestrian-friendly environment.
- Plazas and other public spaces.
- A safe, vibrant, round-the-clock activity center.
- Flexibility.

17. *Do you have a redevelopment agency?*

- Most counties do not, but some larger towns and cities do have a redevelopment agency, including South Lake Tahoe and Truckee.

18. *What are your experiences or impressions of local commercial-area zoning codes in California / Nevada?*

- The Sierra needs its own codes to deal with its historic communities and rural character.

19. *What keeps quality growth from occurring in your commercial areas?*

- Lack of landowner and developer interest. Until recently, codes have been exclusionary of mixed use zoning.
- People don't understand mixed use development.
- Developers are interested in big-box retail developments.
- Lack of design guidelines or models for Sierra commercial development.

20. *Do these Smart Development objectives cost more in your opinion? Please explain.*

- They cost more initially, but add value to the community.

21. What will make the Commercial and Mixed Use Handbook helpful to you?

- Illustrations
- Checklists
- Matrices
- Public education tools

22. What kind of incentives could be provided?

- Tax rebates, incremental financing, streamlining of requirements and codes to make quality development easier, quicker, and more predictable.

23. SBC's anticipated approach is to create a number of place-based model districts including:

- Minor Neighborhood Centers (corner stores, convenience services, and mixed use)
- Main Streets
- Major Commercial and Mixed Use Centers (retail, office, and mixed use serving more than one neighborhood)
- Corridors (linear mixed use zones with pedestrian-oriented nodes)

24. Do you have any comments about the four model types of commercial and mixed use development structure mentioned above?

- Understanding commercial needs in seasonal and resort communities can be a challenge.
- A rural centers district needs to be developed.

- Each district needs to be defined within a context and with surrounding land uses. Communities must decide how they want to grow and which commercial districts need to be allocated for future demand.

25. Are there uses and standards that should be specifically included or not included in any of these districts?

- Drive-thrus should not be included in a downtown district.

26. What is the biggest obstacle to pedestrian-oriented development? What should be done through regulations or zoning code incentives to overcome this obstacle?

- Most respondents indicated that local street and state highway design were the biggest obstacles to pedestrian-oriented development.
- One town has created a special district to construct and pay for sidewalk and pedestrian-scale lighting improvements.

27. Could the pattern and scale of historic Sierra communities be used as a model for new developing areas and infill?

- Yes, an established framework for infill development would be helpful. Developers and planners must understand how a place functions before developing it.
- Yes, use the historic patterns and create a functional transition between historic downtowns, emerging areas, and new development areas.

- Design standards and parking-in-lieu fees could promote this type of growth.

28. Should the development review procedures include both a performance-based approach and a clear and objective approach, and the developer can choose which one to use?

- Yes, both approaches are good. An efficient planning approval process is the key.
- A performance-based approach is better because if you want a particular type of development to happen, require it!
- Some rural counties believe a performance-based approach is too labor-intensive, open to too much interpretation, and doesn't always mean a good end product.
- Developers should be able to choose which option they prefer.
- Mammoth Lakes is aggressively pursuing a performance-based approach. Examples include assessment districts for road improvements, snow removal for infill developments, and a fee waiver for residential over commercial districts.

