

Chapter 1 • The Renaissance of Commercial and Mixed Use Development in the Sierra

Introduction

In 1997, the Sierra Business Council (SBC) published its award-winning book *Planning for Prosperity: Building Successful Communities in the Sierra Nevada*. The publication, developed to help communities plan wisely for their own future, outlined a set of planning principles which together provide an effective framework for community planning in the Sierra.

For *Planning for Prosperity*, SBC researched the economic and demographic changes taking place in the Sierra and the impact of those changes on the built landscape. We surveyed business owners and found that 82 percent identified “*the high quality of life*” as one of the most significant advantages of doing business in this region. When asked to define “*quality of life*,” business owners identified the following: “access to high quality wildlands; the landscape surrounding my immediate community; and the rural character of the overall region.” Also, it was noted that each year as more and more people move to the Sierra, our counties and towns are struggling with the consequences of rapid growth and urban sprawl. In fact, the challenge before us today is to find ways to accommodate new growth while preserving the very assets attracting people, capital, and business to our region — our small-town appeal and our beautiful natural landscape.

One result of this rapid growth is that many Sierra Nevada towns have both older and newer commercial districts. In most Sierra towns, the centerpiece of town is an historic commercial and residential core

that dates back to the days of horse and buggy. Adjacent to the historic core, or on the outskirts of town, are additions made to the community from the 1950s onward, with automobile access in mind. These newer sections often consist of monotonous, unattractive commercial strips that detract from the overall economic and visual appeal of town and blur the clear edge between town and countryside.

The economic, environmental, social, and visual cost of poorly planned growth is now far more widely understood. The alternative to sprawl is more compact, town-based development. Instead of building isolated homes and subdivisions that drain our resources and degrade our region’s prized rural character, we can fill in and grow out from our existing towns, villages and hamlets, adding homes, businesses, and neighborhoods to our communities.



Downtown Grass Valley, with its senior housing apartments (building at right), exemplifies modern mixed use in an historic district.



Highway commercial sprawl and look-alike architecture detract from our unique sense of place.

As is so often the case, history is offering us guidance. The Sierra is dotted with vibrant small-towns that have been the social, economic, and cultural centers of our region for over a hundred year. The beauty and charm of these historic towns have been recorded by artists, writers, and tourists since the early days of the Gold Rush¹. Founded in the quest for gold, these towns served the needs of miners with retail areas, housing, civic centers, saloons, and churches. Pre-dating the automobile, the towns were built around the principle of “mixed use” — allowing different types of uses (such as residential, commercial, office, and retail) to be mixed, either in the same building, on the same site, or on the same block. As a result, the Sierra’s towns were built as compact, vibrant, bustling centers with lots of pedestrian activity, day and night.

Despite the passage of time and tremendous change, nearly all of these historic downtowns still exist. But over the last several decades, many have been encircled and overwhelmed by more modern, auto-oriented development, major freeways and highways, urban sprawl, and traffic congestion — all partially encouraged by a pronounced shift from mixed use development to widely separated uses, as dictated by modern, post-1950 zoning codes.

Many of the Sierra’s historic downtowns have struggled to stay alive, physically and economically. But as the region moves into the 21st century, these centers — and the whole concept of mixed use — are making a major comeback.

Towns such as June Lake were built in a compact fashion, conforming to the Sierra topography.

The Sierra Business Council has surveyed local chambers of commerce, developers, and planning directors (See *Appendix B*) and discovered that many projects are in the planning or construction phase to revitalize traditional town centers and bring mixed use principles to areas previously slated for, or dominated by, strip developments. The trend is evident from hamlets like Murphys and Genoa to larger cities like South Lake Tahoe and Grass Valley.

With renewal interest in commercial and mixed use development (CMU), there is no single source that builders, planners, or citizens in the Sierra can refer to for information. Hence our effort to create *Building Vibrant Sierra Communities: A Commercial and Mixed Use Handbook* for the Sierra to bring together language and code concepts that communities can use to reinforce or catalyze CMU development. In addition, this publication presents case studies of innovative real-life projects that are excellent examples for discussion, study, or emulation. There is also valuable information about traditional Sierra town patterns, the backbone for our region’s mixed use renaissance.



Within this first Commercial and Mixed Use Handbook, we propose guidelines that will allow communities to develop and redevelop in ways that prevent or correct destructive, sprawling, or segregated development patterns. We are fortunate that our historic patterns are still the norm, not the exception, in the region. Without careful diligence, however, poorly designed developments could permanently deface and degrade the scenic, social, and biological environment that makes the Sierra such a spectacular place. Luckily, we do have the ability to preserve and create wonderful, thriving, and beautiful communities within the Sierra. Our communities are places that we can enjoy and love today, and leave as a legacy for the future.

—Craig Threshie, AIA, ASLA,
Alpen Environs Architecture and
Environmental Design and Mayor
of Truckee 2005.

Mixed Use

Much of what we consider to be unique about small towns is actually embodied in the concept of mixed use zoning. Mixed use zoning simply means allowing and encouraging a variety of activities to coexist within one district, usually a downtown district.

A key component of mixed use zoning is mixing residential with commercial uses, as commonly occurs in a traditional town where one building accommodates a combination of ground floor retail and second and third story residential. Mixed use zoning often provides housing at close to zero land cost, helping communities meet the demand for more affordable housing. Mixed use zoning also enhances the economic and social vitality of downtown areas by drawing people into the area throughout the day and night, increasing public safety. Finally, mixed use zoning reduces auto dependency by making it easier for residents to shop near their homes².



The Sierra Tavern provides affordable apartments above retail in Truckee's mixed use downtown.

How the CMU Handbook Is Organized

While **Chapter 1** introduces the history of commercial and mixed use development in the Sierra Nevada, **Chapter 2** focuses on the common characteristics of the Sierra's historic town patterns and how CMU emerged from these patterns. We look at factors affecting commercial development following World War II and the Sierra towns which best exemplify CMU development. We then present the latest trends in commercial development based on interviews with dozens of business and planning leaders across the Sierra and discuss the reasons Sierra developers and planners incorporate mixed use into their projects.

Chapter 3 describes tools, guidelines, and standards that can be used or modified to set the future direction of commercial districts. To achieve enduring value, it is important to respect historic patterns while meeting the needs of today's vibrant communities.

Chapters 4 through 9 consider six prototype commercial districts that are prevalent throughout the Sierra. Along with the prototype, case studies of commercial and mixed use projects designed for each prototype are included. Ranging in size from community centers to rural outposts, these districts include:

Downtown / Main Street (DMS)

Neighborhood Convenience Center (NCC)

Neighborhood Center (NC)

Shopping District (SD)

Commercial Corridor (CC)

Rural Community Center (RCC)

The case studies describe a diverse array of communities including Murphys, South Lake Tahoe, Dutch Flat, Truckee, Grass Valley, and Sierraville to discuss elements of successful commercial and mixed use (CMU) projects in a variety of settings.

A Living Document

Because the field of commercial and mixed use development is constantly affected by innovation and change, this *CMU Handbook* has been written as a snapshot in time. In the future, new projects, codes, and resources will be reflected through periodic updates. SBC publications can be ordered from our web site at www.sbcouncil.org. A summary version of this document is also available to the public on this site.

If you are developing mixed use projects or know of examples in the Sierra, please share them with us, as we would like to add them to future revisions and electronic updates. As part of our commitment to building networks throughout the Sierra, SBC members can share experiences and knowledge in

the field of commercial and mixed use development – as well as others – through our membership forums and activities. To become a member go to www.sbcouncil.org/join.htm or call (530) 582-4800.

Additional Tools

Commercial development is not the only kind of development taking place in the Sierra. SBC also plans to prepare practical, on-the-ground publications addressing other key planning issues in the Sierra, including open space, housing, and transportation. A broad and helpful overview of planning issues in the Sierra can be found in *Planning for Prosperity*, SBC's national-award-winning guide to rural community planning. SBC's most recent publication, *Investing for Prosperity*, provides excellent information on the linkage between traditional town patterns, livable communities, and economic growth. These documents, which feature dozens of case studies and background resources, are available at www.sbcouncil.org/publications.

Finally, SBC partners with towns and counties interested in planning their future through place-based approaches that utilize innovative techniques and community participation. SBC has worked on strategic visioning in Inyo County, community design in Truckee, June Lake, Minden (NV), and South Lake Tahoe, and conservation planning in fast-growing Placer County. If you are interested in applying principles from this Handbook or *Planning for Prosperity* within your community, please contact us by phone or e-mail, (530) 582-4800 or info@sbccouncil.org.

The Sierra Business Council believes that planning decisions that are consistent with the Planning for Prosperity principles provide the best hope for maintaining and strengthening the high quality of life we presently enjoy in the Sierra. These ten principles for sound development are:

1. Safeguard the rural character of the Sierra Nevada by maintaining a clear edge between town and country.
2. Preserve historic assets.
3. Build to create enduring value and beauty.
4. Enhance the economic vitality of our small towns through ongoing reinvestment in the downtown core.
5. Anticipate and address the housing needs of all community residents.
6. Conserve and showcase each community's natural assets.
7. Maintain the economic productivity of our region's agricultural lands and forests.
8. Do not place people and structures in harm's way.
9. Maintain the health of the natural systems which support life in the Sierra Nevada.
10. Expand local and regional transportation to reduce traffic congestion and the intensity of public dependence on the automobile.

