

Chapter 2 • The Roots of Sierra Commercial Development



Downtowns were built along railroads and rivers following the contours of the Sierra.

A classic grid system could not be forced on the topography of the Sierra, resulting in unique town patterns such as Auburn's downtown circa 1894.



The Sierra Nevada's early commercial developments—railroad towns, mills towns, and mining towns—like many of the best inventions, were products of necessity and on-the-spot creativity. Beginning in the mid-1800s, miners and merchants quickly laid out new towns to support the population boom following the discovery of gold. They often began with the traditional grid pattern used in their birthplaces and applied it to the rounded slopes of the foothills. Other communities grew organically over time.

“Most early town-site and neighborhood developers in the West, like those elsewhere, preferred relatively flat sites because of the difficulty of scaling steeper hills with animal-drawn wagons and carriages. There was one necessary exception to this rule — mining towns, whose economic base was mostly located in mountainous areas. Here the high-value product, and the need for workers to extract it, led to irregular town patterns. These typically included only a few long blocks of streamside grid-pattern streets, surrounded by curved streets that followed the contours of the hills in the most expedient manner...”¹

What is ironic is that these towns, born of practicality, became some of the most charming and beautiful communities in the West and are highly sought after by families in the 21st century. They provide a model for future growth that is both unique to our region and of proven and enduring value.

Characteristics of the Sierra's Historic Town Patterns

Topographic Variety

The Sierra's traditional towns are not homogenous. Although the towns had similar characteristics, they were all built to reflect the unique topography of the area, and they were usually built around trails that evolved into horse paths and ultimately roads. Town layouts were also affected by the settlers' decision to build homes near streams and rivers, ensuring that meandering waterways remain a central feature in our towns. Of special note are the interesting splits and termini of streets in places like Nevada City. The commercial Main Street in Jackson gently descends down a slope past dozens of businesses and mixed use buildings, then abruptly turns in front of the National Hotel. Not surprisingly, the area in front of the hotel was, and is, a popular gathering place.



Boarding houses and retail made for compact downtowns.

Mixed Use

The downtowns were built compactly with primarily commercial development at the center, surrounded tightly by residential development. Some residential property was mixed in with commercial property even within the same building. Historically, the residential properties closest to the commercial areas were multi-unit buildings (typically boarding houses to serve single miners). Over time, single-family homes were developed at the perimeter of town, typically above the noise and pollution of local industry along the “contour curves.” Public buildings and employment centers (foundries) were sprinkled throughout the town at walkable distances from homes and businesses.

Narrow Streets

Most of the streets were built for the horse and carriage and their narrow widths are still evident today. Sierra Business Council staff intrepidly measured these streets with a tape measure and found them far narrower than standard streets currently built. For example, in Volcano the travel lane width is 11 ft. while in Jamestown it is 10 ft. and even narrower in sections of Sutter Creek. (Most modern road standards require travel lanes of at least 12-foot widths.) The side streets were even narrower, leading to slow travel speeds (especially once automobiles came on the scene) and a strong pedestrian orientation.

Zero Lot Lines

In nearly every case, traditional Sierra structures were built up to the edge of sidewalks or roads, creating more compact towns. Compactness was also emphasized by building most commercial properties and homes directly next to each other.

Building Elevations

Because of building technologies at the time, most structures were built from 1 to 3 stories. When combined with the compact building pattern and narrow roads, these buildings created a comfortable, “room-like” feeling for people walking along the sidewalks or roads. The towns felt neither too open nor too closed.

Building Materials

Early Sierra communities consisted of wooden and canvas structures, allowing devastating fires to destroy entire neighborhoods. By the late 1800s, many commercial and civic buildings were constructed of locally made brick and native stone. Some settlers erected buildings to match the iron doors and windows they had brought with them.

Pedestrian-Oriented

Traditional Sierra commercial districts and towns were originally built for people to walk or ride their horses — hence the wide array of sidewalks. Some sidewalks are elevated due to the topography or to allow people to walk comfortably at a safe distance from the buggies and horses. Signage was at eye height, and balconies, awnings, and canopies contributed to pedestrian comfort.



Illustration of narrow road width documented from a map of Angels Camp circa 1905.

Building height transitions create unique patterns and a strong sense of place.



The scale, position, and elevation of the buildings, the width and contours of the street, the proximity of homes and retail stores, the mixed use of buildings for retail and residence all contributed to the unique pattern and sense of place so notable in our small Sierra towns. We have inherited a special architectural legacy which, when placed against the backdrop of our foothill and mountain vistas, explains the unique beauty and appeal of our Sierra towns.

Twentieth Century Changes

By the mid-1900s, the Sierra's mining industry had begun to wane. While the timber industry and local agriculture helped maintain local economies, many of the historic commercial districts struggled to survive. At the same time, the arrival of large state and federal highways did major damage to some of the districts. Highway 40, though it originally bypassed the commercial heart of Auburn, wiped out much of the historic district. Later, as the highway evolved into Interstate 80, interchanges and off-ramps were created, increasing the divide between the town's commercial and residential districts. In Nevada City, Highway 49 was sunk and widened, destroying historic buildings and the town square and creating a gap in the middle of the town. In addition, new bypasses steered potential customers away from downtowns such as Jackson, Jamestown, and, in the Eastern Sierra, Minden.

Cyclists race through the historic narrow streets of Nevada City.



Additional blows to historic downtowns included zoning for highway services along freeway off-ramps, urban sprawl, free-standing grocery stores, strip development, major shopping malls, and most recently, big box stores. The placement of these businesses along the town edges and at freeway off-ramps has taken the retail life out of many Sierra downtowns. It has also introduced national franchises with their look-alike corporate architecture and signage. These types of development result in sprawl, auto dependence, separated uses, and a visual impact of sameness. This has begun forcing some community decision-makers to ask the question "If we look like 'everywhere else USA,' why would anyone want to visit or live here?"

Where are the Sierra's Commercial Districts Today?

Despite all of these changes, the Sierra's traditional commercial districts have hung on, and in some cases even prospered. However, because of the impact of the changes mentioned above, there is now a broad spectrum of districts ranging from compact and walkable to sprawling and auto-oriented. Sierra commercial districts can be characterized as:

Compact but Limited Service

Some traditional Sierra downtowns have maintained their charm and enjoy gateways to their historic commercial districts that are relatively uncluttered by modern strip development. Examples are Nevada City, Sutter Creek, Volcano and Murphys. However, most of the businesses in their commercial districts are oriented toward the hospitality industry —

hotels, restaurants, boutiques, antiques stores, and bars. Groceries, hardware stores, and other everyday essentials have moved miles away to modern shopping districts.

Compact and Full Service

A few Sierra communities still have historic downtown commercial districts where people can live without a car and get everything they need to live comfortably. Chief among these are Grass Valley and Quincy. Both have vibrant traditional downtowns with a diverse array of businesses (Grass Valley has the Sierra's only official Main Street program to boost the district's prospects). Appended to these districts are modern retail centers, including major supermarkets, that are easily accessible from downtown.

Mixed Modern and Traditional

A number of Sierra towns, such as Jackson and Bishop, have built up parallel modern commercial districts near their traditional downtowns. The older commercial districts tend to be dominated by boutiques, restaurants, and galleries, while the newer districts contain retail operations serving people's everyday needs. Although it might be possible for someone to walk between these districts, the distances are significant and the road crossings can be difficult, especially when hauling groceries or other bulky goods.

Traditional Surrounded by Modern

Many Sierra communities have found themselves with a traditional commercial district with modern strip development at their gateway. Also, everyday services tend to be far removed (a mile or more) from downtown and most residential neighborhoods. Examples would include Truckee, Angels Camp,

Auburn, Susanville, and Placerville. One distinction within this category is towns with "big box" stores (defined as stores with over 40,000 sf under one roof) and those without. This distinction partly depends on the size of the market area; most big box chains rely on a trade-area population of at least 50,000. (A trade-area in rural areas is defined as within a one-hour commute.) However, some communities, like Truckee, have imposed a 40,000 sf cap on the size of retail establishments.

Strips and Malls

A few Sierra towns founded their commercial districts after World War II. They are dominated by separated uses with homes, retail, and offices typically built far apart and strip development and malls as the commercial area. Perhaps the most prominent are Mammoth Lakes in the Eastern Sierra; Oakhurst, on the way to Yosemite National Park; and El Dorado Hills, in El Dorado County. Without a car, it is difficult to get around these towns, let alone shop for goods and services. Interestingly, Mammoth Lakes is now undertaking a number of projects to boost the pedestrian-friendly nature of its commercial district. Some projects are as simple as new sidewalks near the gateway intersection into town, while others are as elaborate as the Village, a multi-story mixed use development built by Intrawest, a Canadian resort developer. Although the Village is targeted toward tourists and second-home buyers, Intrawest sought to make the development friendly to people interested in a car-free experience, including a gondola link from the Village to the base of Mammoth Mountain Ski Area.

Grass Valley's compact Main Street brings in residents and visitors for full-service shopping opportunities.



The Future of Sierra Commercial Development

In preparing this *CMU Handbook*, the Sierra Business Council surveyed 13 planning directors in Sierra counties and towns. SBC also contacted 18 chambers of commerce from a diverse array of the region's communities. Our purpose was to gauge general development trends that will impact future directions in commercial development.

SBC found that the pattern of development continues to be commercial strip malls, with increasing pressure for big box stores and commercial village or "life-style" centers. Some Sierra communities are now hotly debating the merits of new big box and large-scale development (Sonora, Angels Camp, and Minden). However, there are also many notable efforts to maintain the beauty of our classic Sierra towns and keep our historic downtowns vibrant. Detailed in both *Planning for Prosperity* and *Investing for Prosperity* are local initiatives to invigorate commercial cores. These include:

- Principles for involving and serving business and the public;²
- Engaging the local community in land use planning decisions;³
- Capitalizing on the links between livable communities and economic growth;⁴
- Preserving historic assets;⁵
- Creating main street programs;⁶
- Setting community design guidelines;⁷
- Establishing design guidelines for franchises;⁸

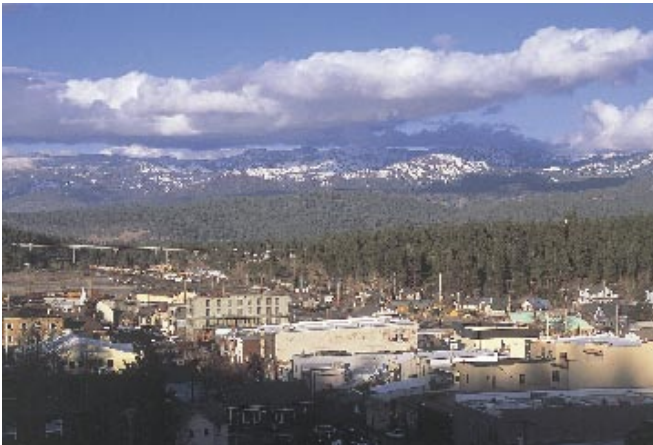
- Cultivating new types of business;⁹
- Setting limits on the maximum square footage for commercial development to limit big box stores;¹⁰ and
- Tying tourism into the economic future of Sierra communities.¹¹

What was also surprising was the resurgence of the early characteristics of Sierra commercial districts: zero lot lines (bringing buildings to the sidewalk and putting parking behind buildings); greater emphasis on mixed use, with second-story apartments topping retail operations; more compact development (even covering up parking lots with new retail operations); and designs that incorporate or mimic historic aspects of a Sierra community.

Why has there been this shift back toward our historic roots and mixed use? There are many reasons (some of which follow), but **commercial and mixed use** (CMU) is one tool that communities are using to achieve long-term prosperity. CMU is part of a national trend toward more compact, efficient, charming neighborhoods and downtown districts. Large cities and small towns alike are interested in creating districts that mix residential and business uses.

Real estate analyst Bill Fulton has observed the "de-malling" of California, even in one of the heartlands of malls, Southern California. He zeroed in on Whitwood Center, a mall built 50 years ago that has now been converted to Whitwood Town Center, which boasts a retail core with 150 townhomes incorporated into the design. As Fulton writes, "Whitwood is now the opposite of what it was originally supposed to be. The whole point of the facelift is to mimic — rather than counterpose — the conventional urban retail district."¹²

The future of Truckee's downtown is in large part tied to infill development in the old mill site at the top left of the photo.



Mixed use is increasingly used to combat the eyesores of dilapidated centers and to revitalize areas; it is considered by many development interests to be a smart use of land. Steven Plenge, Executive Vice President of Somera Capital Management, a real estate investment company in Santa Barbara, says that “all cities should look at this trend.”¹³

Sierra communities are in touch with this trend. For example, Truckee and North Fork are planning commercial and mixed use developments on old timber mill sites. At the same time, newer communities are retrofitting their auto-oriented towns to create a mixed use environment that welcomes pedestrians. As mentioned earlier, Mammoth Lakes now has a new “Village” center (as does Squaw Valley), mixing retail and condominiums oriented to second-home owners. El Dorado Hills, built in a post-WWII suburban style, is now investing in a Town Center to create a civic gathering place. The center will include restaurants, a movie theater, an amphitheater, and pedestrian walkways to a retail shopping center.

The increased appeal of CMU has been spotted by those who track real estate for a living. Brooke Warrick, President of American LIVES, a market survey group, says, “People prefer town centers with a village green surrounded by shops and civic buildings. Consumers now want features that not only allow, but promote, interaction with other families, children, and community organizations.”¹⁴

The Urban Land Institute has identified “Lifestyle Centers” as a tool for creating walkable mixed use centers in new large-scale development projects (www.ULI.org). We believe that the Sierra’s historic downtowns are excellent models for this form of development.

Beyond the desire for more community-centered development, builders and developers are finding that CMU is profitable. In the Calaveras County town of Murphys, developers designed a new mixed use development that artfully blends with the community’s charming downtown and historic buildings. In so doing, they saw commercial lease rates surge from the expected \$1.25 to \$1.60 per square foot per month. *See Chapter 4, Downtown / Main Street case study for more information about Murphys.*

Another key reason for mixed use is that it attracts an important clientele in an evolving economy. As economist Richard Florida indicates, communities that succeed in a more competitive, knowledge-based economy are the ones that draw “creative class” people — highly educated, entrepreneurial folks who forge new ideas and businesses through the power of their creativity. Florida has documented that “creative class” entrepreneurs are attracted to vibrant towns and cities with places to connect with other people and a mix of commercial and residential uses.¹⁸

In our discussions with chambers of commerce, it was evident that ensuring affordable housing for a community’s working families — nurses, teachers, police, clerks, firefighters — is becoming a key issue. In Placer County, the Sierra’s most populated county, the median new-home price is \$538,990,¹⁹ creating a need for additional housing options. Mixed use development can help by providing a wider array of housing — apartments, lofts, and townhomes — than the classic suburban subdivision that has dominated recent Sierra home construction. By using multi-story design, integrating uses, and building to the sidewalk edge, developers can create more “product” on less land, and communities can make more efficient use of the infrastructure for sewer, communications, transportation, and water.²⁰

Infill Development for Mixed Use

Through a partnership between the Town of Truckee, the Sierra Business Council, the California Center for Land Recycling, and a grant from the California Pollution Control Financing Authority, the town was able explore redevelopment of the 35-acre historic Railyard and Old Lumber Mill site adjacent to Truckee’s vibrant historic downtown. With the Town’s blessing, the property was sold by Union Pacific to a developer committed to commercial and mixed use opportunities. The redevelopment of this site gives Truckee an opportunity to generate more tax revenue, extend its historic commercial core, showcase the Truckee river, house needed public facilities, provide affordable housing for the community’s workforce, and discourage additional sprawl into the forested recreational lands that surround the town — all of which will contribute to the sustainability of Truckee’s vibrant downtown.



Historic Districts and Commercial Mixed Use

Historic districts not only protect your town's historic treasures, they can also provide a mechanism to launch a commercial and mixed use economic revitalization. Nevada City paved the way for the Sierra's historic downtowns using this tool to encourage CMU. "On August 12, 1968, Nevada City Ordinance No. 338 Establishing a Historical District was adopted, the first ordinance of its kind in the gold rush country of California. With the ordinance in place, the mission of the city's stakeholders was made clear. By the end of 1973 a downtown improvement plan removed utility poles, put in place over 70 gaslights (still the most anywhere west of the Mississippi), and the last of the nonconforming signs were removed. Facelifts for buildings were approved with an eye towards restoring the district's former historic grandeur."¹⁵ In 1985 Nevada City was placed on the National Register of Historic Places and in 2005 the town created a Business Improvement District (BID) to promote the downtown. The BID is "a cooperative effort to improve business and community life through the support of Arts, Culture, Historic Preservation, and the Environment. The District strives to provide a vibrant, attractive, pedestrian-friendly place in which all generations can enjoy living, working, shopping and playing."¹⁶ Nevada City, like all Sierra towns continually copes with changes in the economy, population, and business mix, but as with the new BID, it consistently recognizes its heritage as the core element in defining itself and its future.

As Edwin Tyson of the Nevada County Historical Society's Searls Library states: "Preservation of the town's historic appearance is important to the people of Nevada City. After more than a century of pioneer heritage, Nevada City remains the most complete gold town in California."¹⁷

There are many reasons why Sierra communities are once again embracing their historic patterns, locating stores, offices, restaurants, and residential units in the same area — commercial and mixed use (CMU). For builders and communities alike, a well-designed CMU development:

- Builds on and showcases our historic assets;
- Provides a useful tool when converting or renewing commercial strips and outdated shopping center areas;
- Enhances redevelopment projects by providing a balance of uses and income generators;
- Provides a greater variety of housing options for the young, old, singles, families, and people of diverse income levels;
- Increases pedestrian orientation to enhance the retail environment;
- Reduces automobile use as residents shop locally;
- Enhances the compact nature of our historic towns to provide convenience and independence of movement to those who do not drive or own cars;
- Helps build a sense of community by increasing social interaction;
- Generates increased activity and business for commercial establishments;
- Provides around-the-clock activity in commercial areas, which has been demonstrated to reduce crime;

- Reduces costs by using existing utility services and minimizes the need to construct costly new infrastructure;
- Provides future economic savings for communities on infrastructure maintenance;
- Reduces degradation of our prized agricultural lands, forests, watersheds, and natural areas through compact and infill development;
- Helps protect the natural areas surrounding our communities from urban sprawl; and
- Provides immediate and long-term economic benefits for developers and investors while offering greater long-term social, environmental, and economic sustainability to communities.

Back to the Future

In an interesting way, 150 years after the Gold Rush, the Sierra Nevada is headed back to the patterns that typified its earliest communities. "Clearly modern-day needs dovetail neatly with the walkable neighborhoods in the Sierra's past. The evolving economy not only makes this possible, it makes it desirable and profitable. Traditional, multi-use patterns reduce dependence on the automobile. And, best of all, traditional town patterns make it possible to reweave communities into a cohesive whole."²¹

A Diversity of Commercial Districts

A quick look at four Sierra commercial centers reveals that many towns had similar origins in the 1800s, and there is a wide variety in layout, landmarks and references.

Named after George Angel, who started the town's first company store, **Angels Camp** lies in the heart of the Sierra. The town is underlain by mining tunnels and was supported economically by the operations of more than 200 stamp mills by 1890. Eventually, tourism became the sustaining force of the original downtown, especially with the springtime Jumping Frog Festival, an offshoot in honor of Mark Twain's famous short story, *The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*. The historic commercial district, framed by a church steeple at one end and a creek at the other, was revitalized by a bold renovation of the Angels movie theater in the heart of the district. The town is tightly arrayed in a narrow valley, leading to a twisting, turning residential district at its southern end, which makes a wonderful entry point to the old town.

Similar to Angels Camp and further south is **Mariposa**, a gateway to Yosemite National Park. The town's most prominent early resident was John C. Fremont, the famed explorer and army officer. Mariposa is squeezed into a small creek valley with commercial buildings fronting the Main Street and backed by residences built along the slope of the valley. The commercial district has been dramatically enriched by a new award-winning government and library complex that complements the design of the historic 1857 courthouse. Mariposa's business district illustrates the development trends being faced elsewhere in the Sierra. At the town's western end, there is a mix of old and new. At the eastern end, gas stations are present, but also a large plot

of land that has been donated for the new home for California's State Mineral Museum — a fitting gateway to a town born of gold mining.

In the north central Sierra lies **Nevada City**, another former mining town. Spawned by the discovery of gold, the town was originally just called Nevada — until the neighboring state appropriated the name in 1859. For brand purposes, the town changed its name and has remained in the forefront of Sierra historic preservation efforts. Not long after the nearby Empire Mine closed down in 1956, the town adopted an ordinance to preserve pre-World War II buildings in its struggling downtown. This was an extraordinary move in the mid-20th century, but the payoff was the recruitment of hundreds of skilled professionals and artisans. As Larry Burkhardt, Executive Officer of the Nevada County Economic Resource Council, says, "the community is the product."

Broad Street serves as the main commercial and pedestrian thoroughfare of this walkable town. The topography, building placements, views, and narrow streets make for a walker's dream. Many of the town's side streets are narrow and curve in striking ways — they also happen to follow miners' old walking tracks. In an interesting adaptation of new to old, the oldest bike race on the West Coast, Nevada City's Annual Bicycle Classic, sends top-flight cyclists zooming through the historic crooked streets.

On the east side of the Sierra is an interesting example of a commercial and mixed use district that doesn't rest on hills: **Minden**, Nevada. The town was founded in the early 1900s by H. F. Dangberg, who modeled the community after Minden, Germany.

If you walk into Minden's town hall today, you are greeted by giant photos of the Minden on the other side of the Atlantic. This Nevada town still features a charming commercial district surrounded by tree-lined residential streets. The original heart of town is anchored by important public buildings like the Minden Inn (1912) and the Douglas County Courthouse (1915), both designed by prominent architect Frederick De Longchamps.

As with much of the Sierra, Minden's modern strip development is located along new roads that bypass the historic downtown. When local citizens realized the damage this was causing the historic commercial district, they banded together in a collaborative process to produce Minden's Plan for Prosperity. The plan, produced by numerous local citizens, the Sierra Business Council, and planner Bruce Race, uses old-style Sierra (and European) patterns to knit together the historic and modern sections of Minden. As a result of the collaborative effort, public support for the plan has been strong, leading to unanimous votes for the plan by the Douglas County Commission and the Minden Town Council.

For more information about these unique Sierra districts, you can contact: Angels Camp, the Calaveras County Chamber of Commerce (209) 736-2580; Mariposa, the Mariposa County Chamber of Commerce (209) 966-2456; Nevada City, the Nevada City Chamber of Commerce (530) 265-2692; and Minden, the Carson Valley Chamber of Commerce (800) 727-7677.

