

Chapter 3 • Encouraging Commercial Mixed Use in the Sierra

Implementing CMU Approaches in Commercial Districts Throughout the Sierra



Successful communities encourage new CMU design that enhances our sense of place.

As our population grows and disperses, new commercial centers have popped up on town peripheries, in shopping malls, in new neighborhoods, and along highways. Sierra communities are now dotted with a mix of commercial districts — including the good, the bad, and the outright ugly — all coexisting with our historic downtowns and rural community centers.

After studying these commercial trends, SBC has created a more simplified way of looking at commercial and mixed use. We identified the six most common types of commercial

districts in the Sierra today and created a hierarchy of districts with mixed use embedded in each district. We believe that through the use of these districts, modified to address each community's individual needs, CMU areas may be planned in a more comprehensive fashion. Few communities will have a need to use all six prototypes of the commercial districts we have identified. Rather, communities should use and modify those that fit their local needs. Also, all six types of commercial districts continue to evolve, requiring flexibility and innovation by community decision-makers.

The most common types of commercial district found in the Sierra today include:

1. Downtown / Main Streets (DMS)
2. Neighborhood Convenience Centers (NCC)
3. Neighborhood Centers (NC)
4. Shopping Districts (SD)
5. Commercial Corridors (CC)
6. Rural Community Centers (RCC)

Place-making in the Sierra is about responding to the community context and building on our local assets.¹ To promote and encourage innovative mixed uses and compact, pedestrian-friendly communities, communities must first set a clear vision and then adapt standards and guidelines to encourage distinct commercial districts that fit that place. However, for effective CMU developments to emerge, additional tools must be available. Exceptions and variances are usually needed with CMU, to encourage innovation and to deal with the dynamic tension between modern safety and fire standards and historic buildings with their narrow corridors and stairwells and smaller doors. Similarly, managing parking in downtowns built for the horse and buggy requires adaptations.

Successful Sierra communities are meeting these challenges by using flexibility and creativity while providing a clear vision, guidelines, and standards. They offer incentives for good CMU design and are willing to provide variances to ensure that built commercial areas enhance the community's sense of place, economic vitality, and social connections.

Setting a Clear Vision

Many of the recommendations herein — from avoiding commercial corridors to incorporating residences in commercial and office areas — often contradict local Sierra zoning ordinances and recent community custom. Planning directors recognize this reality and understand that a full discussion with the community is needed to develop support for CMU applications. Opportunities for engaging citizens in these discussions have been discussed in *Planning for Prosperity* and many other sources. Key engagement opportunities for educating and involving the public include:

Visioning provides a broad-brush opportunity to bring a full cross section of the community together to inform themselves, discuss their values and community assets, and shape a vision for their future. A well-run visioning process helps build respectful relationships, creates an opportunity to hear diverse views, and fosters cooperative attitudes for future problem-solving.

Surveys such as visual preference surveys help gauge the community's values and priorities by providing a range of options and asking residents to rank them. Visual preferences cover everything from landscaping to architectural styles and give direct visual feedback on what citizens value. With vague values like “community character,” visual preference surveys get specific resident feedback on everything — from the number of stories in a retail building to preferred parking locations — that fits their image of community character.

Finally, words like “high density” often evoke negative images for people, yet pictures of higher density areas often evoke positive reactions.

General Plans and their updates engage the community in setting forth their goals and standards for future development at the county level or in incorporated towns. It represents the community's blueprint for future development. CMU is addressed directly in General Plans and the standards and guidelines are then set in the zoning and subsequent ordinances.

Community or Specific Plans are subsets of the General Plan and designed to be consistent with and support its implementation. They affect a portion of the community such as the downtown, the riverfront, or a specific neighborhood that merits unique zoning. Residents are often invited to contribute to these specific plans. The opportunities for CMU are determined within these plans by the allowable land uses, zoning, and standards such as building setbacks, maximum lot size etc.

The formation of **Redevelopment Districts** also offers opportunities for community engagement.

Sierra community members work together to describe their vision for the future.



These districts are a tool created by state law to assist local governments in funding the costs associated in eliminating blight from a designated area and achieving other community goals of development, reconstruction, and rehabilitation. They are particularly useful in funding infrastructure improvements and affordable housing.

Site Plan Reviews look at the specific intent and design of a proposed development and also provide an opportunity for citizen engagement. Design charrettes are often used in these situations. They are intense workshops with all key stakeholders and community members working together to design a plan that meets community needs around a specific development. A downtown infill development or a redevelopment proposal is a great opportunity for a design charrette or other facilitated meetings to help develop CMU options.

When communities have a clearly articulated vision, everyone benefits. When communities are unclear about their desired future, or general plans are

outdated, the community may become polarized. Effective CMU developments advance the values and goals of the community — by definition requiring effective community engagement.

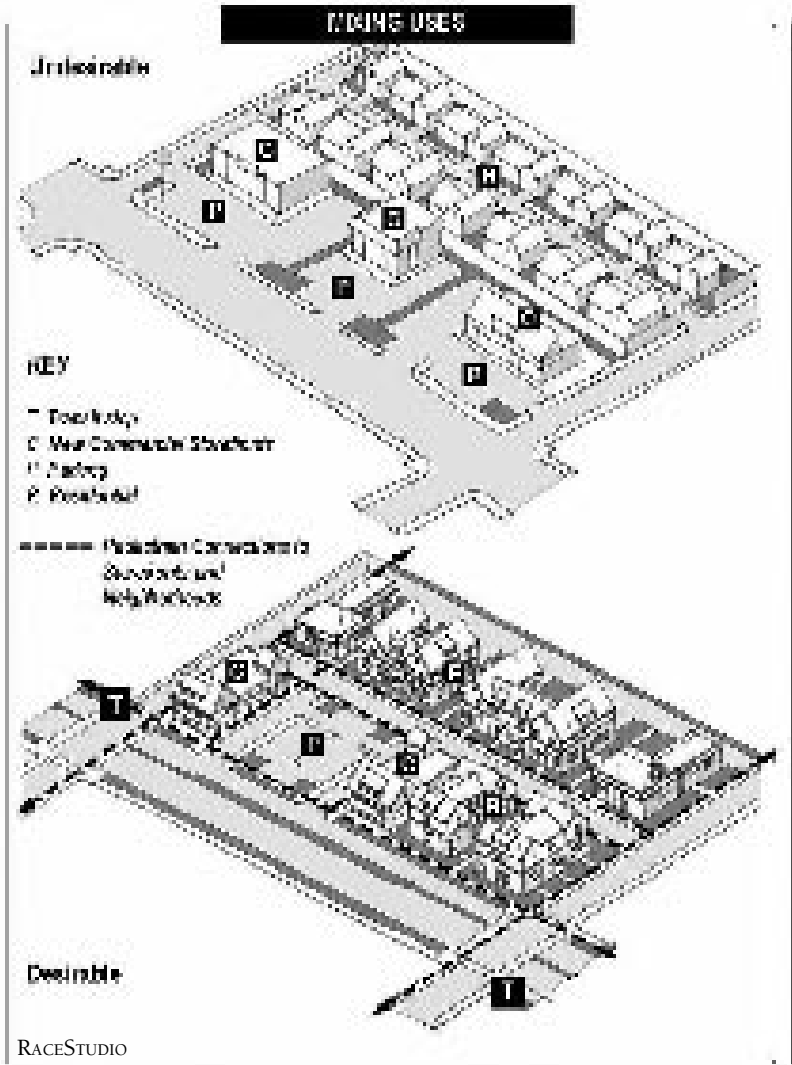
Setting Guidelines and Standards That Enhance Our Historic Patterns

Historic mixed use areas in the Sierra have evolved over the last 150 years to be successful retail and residential environments while also proving to be of enduring value and beauty. As the interviewed Sierra planning directors indicated, setting high design standards consistent with traditional town patterns will encourage new developments that complement our historic architecture and compact layout.

Design guidelines are recommendations to developers that ease the approval process. They are meant to reach across property boundaries to articulate the community's design goals and objectives for development and redevelopment in each district. They must be able to accommodate the wide range of commercial needs in the community, and they must be flexible enough to allow for the creativity of the architects and developers. Standards, which provide more exacting specifications, are often problematic in the Sierra today, because many communities adopted standards from suburban retail development models. In the best of cases, guidelines and standards respond to the local context and build upon available assets to create distinct districts unique to each community.

By applying what has been learned from the early design characteristics that continue to enrich our small towns today, standards and guidelines can encourage compact, pedestrian-friendly, and mixed use commercial districts. For example, the adjoining illustration from RACESTUDIO showcase two very different visions of a commercial and mixed

Guidelines and standards make the difference between these two visions. Use them to ensure integrated commercial and residential uses that encourage pedestrian activity.



use development. The second example depicts how guidelines and standards can encourage CMU developments that promote social interaction and greater pedestrian orientation while complementing our historic town patterns.

In planning for development, most towns or counties use a design review process for reviewing applications, albeit Sierra jurisdictions vary between setting mandatory guidelines and making discretionary recommendations. Often there is an opportunity to meet with city staff to scope issues and opportunities at either a staff hearing or a public hearing with a design review board. Most projects deal with three levels of design review:

1. Community design guidelines
2. Site design guidelines
3. Building design guidelines

Based on our research of historic town patterns, we have listed below some general sample guidelines that can be adapted for use throughout the Sierra and for the different review processes currently in place in various counties and incorporated towns. More detailed sample design guidelines that can be adapted to respond to each of the six prototype commercial districts are available in Appendix A.

Community Design Guidelines

Aerial photos, topographic maps, and other visual aids provide a sense of the relationship between a commercial center and the surrounding community. This context is critical to creating effective guidelines that contribute to unique and high-quality commercial and mixed use developments. How the roads, bikeways, pedestrian access and trails connect to a commercial center, the distance between it and its client population, and the ability of customers to take care of many shopping needs and errands in one place are all factors in a commercial district's success.

Street Layout

Our historic narrow streets serve to slow traffic, make it easier for pedestrians to cross, and contribute to the comfortable feeling of an “outdoor room.” Modern approaches that achieve similar results include:

- Permit narrow lane widths, bulbing, traffic circles, shorter turning radii, and on-street parking on both sides of the street to calm traffic;
- Maintain two-lane streets. Increasing the number of lanes will increase speed;
- Engineer new streets to fit the contours of the hills. Drivers slow on more interesting and curvy roads and will speed up on straightaways where they have longer visual horizons;
- Encourage short blocks and, where possible within the Sierra's topography, grid patterns to other streets to encourage alternate routes and disperse traffic more evenly;
- Eliminate medians between traffic lanes and other symbols associated with the highway systems that encourage faster driving. Landscaped islands, clearly marked speed limits, and crosswalks also serve to slow traffic;
- Build roundabouts or rotary intersections that allow traffic to yield and continue to move forward at a slow speed while avoiding traffic lights;
- Provide well-marked Class III bicycle lanes;
- Line streets with trees to increase the sense of intimacy and rural character;

The Gold Country's Highway 49 winds through many historic Sierra towns such as Amador City (below) and showcases the area's beauty while slowing drivers around its many curves.



- Provide crosswalks at regular intervals (no more than 300 feet), including bulbouts and crosswalks with a different pattern and texture than the traffic lanes; and
- Require signage that reinforces the pedestrian orientation.

Keep in mind that for many Sierra communities a state highway is the main street. Caltrans publications such as *Main Street: Flexibility in Design and Operations*² provide welcome new policies and guidelines. However, state budget constraints and the habitual use of outdated concepts, such as road widening and traffic lights, make innovative approaches along state highways difficult.

One of the most beautiful and interesting drives in California is Highway 49 as it meanders through the Sierra. This highway, with its many bends and turns, showcases the Gold Country's charming small towns, dynamic river canyons, and topographic beauty. It is a constant challenge to maintain the unique symbiotic relationship between the region and Highway 49 as increased commerce and population growth lead to road straightening and widening.

Multi-story buildings provide cover from the elements and create pedestrian friendly walkways.



Pedestrian Walkways

Sidewalks are being built in Mammoth, extended along the main street of Truckee, and designed into new neighborhood centers. Towns are developing master bike and trail plans to ensure that the quality of life and outdoor access that people expect in the Sierra includes connections between their homes, commercial districts, and public

lands. In commercial areas, guidelines should encourage new developments to:

- Create a street canopy with trees and provide landscaping between street and walkway where appropriate;
- Build covered walkways and extended porches and balconies to create safe, comfortable walking areas for pedestrians;
- Design easy connectivity with other paths and sidewalks with ample street crossings including easy links to pedestrian and bike trails along streams and rivers;
- Provide wide sidewalks;
- Incorporate bench seating, public art, outdoor plazas and outdoor eating / display areas that encourage pedestrians. The town should expedite permitting to allow vendors to use the sidewalks;
- Provide full implementation of sidewalk ADA standards to increase access and safety for all pedestrians;
- Instill a sense of the town's character through signage. Give special consideration to gateway areas which introduce and welcome visitors to your community;
- Control height, materials, and lighting of signage for consistency;
- Require signage at pedestrian scale; and
- Require safety lighting at a pedestrian scale.

Public Spaces

From town squares to pocket parks to closed-off streets for block parties, public spaces for people to congregate are essential for communities and CMU districts.

- Create public spaces for major events through street closures if there is not sufficient public space in the commercial area;
- Provide alternate parking and public transit to shuttle customers in from convenient parking

areas — creating easy access for employees on a daily basis or to host larger public events; and

- Publicize ahead of time and provide a well-marked alternative automobile route during street closures.

Parking and Services

There is no question that we need to accommodate the car, but we must do so without damaging historic viewsheds and our towns' character. Sample guidelines for commercial areas today include:

- Survey parking needs, count available parking spaces, and identify areas of potential shared parking. Examine peak use, use patterns and turnover;
- Design a parking management plan;
- Encourage more off-street parking in alleys, back parking areas, and side pocket parking. Avoid creating large asphalt-covered parking areas;
- Allow shared parking spaces by acknowledging that different retail establishments attract customers at different times. The largest parking demand is for restaurants / theaters that can be shared with retail during the day;



A “park once and walk” parking area in Mammoth.

- Consider built parking structures;
- Consider special parking assessments to fund new parking areas;
- Encourage employee parking away from businesses in pre-identified locations throughout town;
- Consider metered parking to encourage parking space turnover and ensure that parking is available to visitors— not monopolized by stay-all-day employees;
- Provide off-site parking with regular public shuttles — especially for employees and during special events;
- Provide built-in public transit stops in all key commercial locations;
- Set times for business deliveries so as not to compete with customer traffic and parking;
- Provide rear and alley access for business deliveries; and
- Allow shared garbage dumpsters.

Site Design Guidelines

Site design guidelines deal with the actual parcel or site where a project or renovation is proposed and how the building(s) will be situated on the parcel. This is an opportunity to consider how the siting of the buildings fits into the wider neighborhood context with regard to lot lines, alleys, parking, landscaping, residential entrances, public access, and service infrastructure.

Building Position

While traditional Sierra commercial structures were built up to the edge of the sidewalk, more recent shopping districts tend to be placed behind parking lots, discouraging pedestrian access. Guidelines that could help reverse this trend include:

- Place all new buildings and renovations in historic areas on street front with zero lot lines, consistent with the neighborhood character;
- Encourage buildings to face the street. Discourage windowless buildings, buildings that back to the street, and doors and windows above eye height — these create spaces that most people regard as unfriendly or uncomfortable, discouraging pedestrian travel;
- Place commercial buildings on the street front rather than behind a large parking lot. This provides screening for internal parking areas and helps accommodate the housing element of CMU — lofts, apartments, and live / work townhouses; and

Setbacks and parking standards help shape historic storefronts in towns like Colfax.



- Redesign malls, commercial strips, and shopping districts by adding street front buildings. This is particularly important when renovating Shopping Districts (SD) and Commercial Corridors (CC).

Landscaping

The cooling impact of trees was well understood by Sierrans prior to air-conditioning. Today, landscaping contributes to increased energy savings, more comfortable shopping experiences, and the general beauty of our communities. Sample landscaping guidelines could include:

- Encourage the planting of trees. Tree-lined streets have been shown to slow traffic while contributing to the visual appeal of the community;
- Maintain and encourage swales and landscaped divides between the road and walkways to entice pedestrians;
- Use non-coniferous trees, particularly in the foothills, to provide an arching canopy for the sense of enclosure as well as shade;
- Maintain existing native trees and bushes where possible;
- Create a list of preferred species and plants varieties. Encourage local tree experts and enthusiasts to assist city staff in researching appropriate native species;
- Discourage large, asphalt-covered sites through tree-planting requirements that will provide a future shade canopy;
- Incorporate walkways in overall landscaping plans; and
- Establish a method for ensuring survival and maintenance of the green infrastructure once the project is completed.

Building Design Guidelines

Building design guidelines provide guidance to enable newer buildings to complement and support the local community character — both the historic area and the rural heritage. Building review provides an opportunity to consider historic materials and newer designs that blend in well. Building size and the architectural details that contribute to the character of the community are also critical components that can honor the legacy of our Sierra towns.

Building Scale

The following sample guidelines are based on surveys of historic districts:

- Encourage the floor area ratio to be approximately 0.4 to 1 as is found in many Sierra historic districts. Use density bonuses to increase the land use intensity, allowing developers to contribute open space, affordable housing, additional parking, or other amenities needed by the community;
- Design massing and façades that are consistent with our historic scale. One of the most difficult aspects of keeping within our historic character is the narrow width of historic commercial buildings, given the square footage requirements of many of today's stores. Cost considerations and retail square footage needs make it difficult to build many small, narrow buildings with all the fire code requirements, etc. Innovative massing, articulation, and façades provide options for developers that complement the main street environment (*see Murphys case study in Chapter 4*); and
- Fit the look and layout of a building within the neighborhood's scale. Height limits in historic areas vary from 15 to 40 feet through most of the Sierra.



The new hotel in Genoa was designed to fit the historic character of the community.



Building Materials

Encourage diverse building façades that utilize historic materials including shingle, plaster, brick, native stone, weathered wood-lap siding, metal, corrugated metal and galvanized steel, reclaimed barn wood, and wood board and batten. Siding materials vary with retail establishments and should honor and reflect standards from the specific historic area.

Architectural Features

To sustain and build on the appeal of the Sierra's historic downtowns and to weave the newer sections of our communities comfortably into the old, care must be taken to ensure flexibility in decision-making to encourage innovation. Many towns find they need parallel codes to manage the renovation of historic buildings so that developers need not conform to all modern standards. Rather, the intent is to engage fire and safety officials in ensuring that buildings can be made secure without having to retrofit everything from narrow hallways to door sizes. This is critical to encourage investment in our historic buildings. Additional sample approaches include:

- Inventory architectural features in your town's historic areas and incorporate them in new designs using balconies, awnings, cornices, dormers, pillars, gables, parapets, and lighting with different treatments and materials consistent with historic diversity;
- Provide balconies and front porches facing the street for residences included in CMU neighborhoods when possible;
- Encourage balconies, awnings, and canopies for pedestrian comfort. Sierra styles of awnings include wood shingles, wood shakes, tin and corrugated metal, and canvas; and
- Include detailed historic design on features such as doors, windows, siding, and trim.

These sample guidelines, when combined with the community's vision and agreement on the intent for our commercial and mixed use districts, can be adapted to design districts that contribute to each town's unique sense of place and Sierra character. By building on the best of our local Sierra town patterns, new developments can encourage innovations that meet the future needs of our Sierra communities while respecting our natural environment and heritage.

Learning from CMU Approaches Throughout the Sierra

The Sierra Business Council has searched for applied examples of how Sierra communities have learned from the past, adapted guidelines and standards for the present, and created CMU developments that enrich our communities. Chapters 4 through 9 provide a closer look at the six prototype commercial and mixed use districts and include current case studies of CMU developments in the Sierra.

Commercial District	Issues Addressed	Case Study
Downtown / Main Streets Chapter 4 — DMS	Historic patterns as a planning tool for successful communities. Designing new buildings that complement the historic district.	Murphys, Calaveras County
Neighborhood Convenience Centers Chapter 5 — NCC	Providing essential services to the local neighborhood. Managing growth with increased density.	Dutch Flat, Placer County
Neighborhood Centers Chapter 6 — NC	Designing a new Sierra commercial and mixed use district in master-planned communities.	Loma Rica, Nevada County
Shopping Districts Chapter 7 — SD	Encouraging nodal mixed use. Managing big box stores and franchise architecture.	The Rock, Nevada County
Commercial Corridor Conversions Chapter 8 — CCC	Converting a linear commercial strip to a nodal commercial center.	The Village Center, El Dorado County
Rural Community Centers Chapter 9 — RCC	Lacking financial investors for CMU what steps can be taken. Managing the evolution of RCCs.	Sierraville, Sierra County

