4.3 Community Centres and Neighbourhood Nodes: Meeting People's Needs Locally

Designing a more sustainable community begins with defining a core. Think of how any small town developed. The essence of community revolved around a public main street or core, centrally located, where people could gather to buy things, get their mail, worship, recreate, relax, meet and chat. Most of our suburban areas do not have cores and do not function this way, but the sustainable suburb of tomorrow should.

The terms community centre and, to a lesser extent, the neighbourhood node are meant to convey this message. The reader should think of these centres as a mix of activities that can satisfy more of the needs of daily living than do today's suburban areas. The larger community centre is intended to serve a community of ±12,000 people, and would consist of retail uses and offices, as well as public uses such as open space, a community hall or facility, a clinic, public services, daycare, etc. The community itself would consist of several neighbourhoods, defined by a 5 minute walk to a node with a smaller mix of activities.

Policy C.1

Mixed use public activity centres must be located in all communities in the form of a community centre and a number of neighbourhood nodes.

Public Benefit Intended

a) To provide for more of people's daily needs within the community, allow trips to be combined and reduce the need to drive outside the community. This will help reduce vehicle emissions, downstream traffic congestion, and reduce or delay public expenditures for road improvements.

b) To enable suburban communities to function as more than a housing base. Communities should be places to live, work, shop and enjoy a range of leisure activities.

c) To create a dynamic and vibrant core to the community that provides a sense of place or community identity.

Acceptable Performance

a) Determine the locations of the community centre and neighbourhood nodes in the early stages of the planning process.

b) Provide a significant mix of public and commercial activities in the community centre to satisfy many of the daily and weekly needs of residents. These include activities and uses such as shopping, public facilities and open space. The community centre should also serve as the main transit 'hub' of the community.

c) At neighbourhood nodes, provide a smaller mix of activities, uses and a transit stop.

d) As part of each Growth Area Management Plan, determine the locations of sector and regional shopping facilities so as to not undermine the viability of community retail.
Design Guidelines

The following guidelines are suggestions to be considered when planning new communities.

a) As a general rule, plan for up to 1sq m (±10 sq ft) of commercial development per resident in a community.

b) In order to ensure local shopping viability, it is recommended that new sector and regional centres be planned a minimum of 3.2 km (±2 mi) driving distance from any community centre.

c) Community centres will function as the key shopping and public use attractions in the community. The size of the retail component will vary depending on the uses attracted to the site, but 5,500 to 7,400 sq m (60,000 to 80,000 sq ft) of commercial space on a 1.2 to 2.4 ha (3 to 6 ac) site is recommended.²

d) Providing for offices and public uses such as open space, a community facility, schools, etc., will require additional acreage at the community centre.

Discussion

The intent of this policy is to infuse a sense of place in the suburbs through the provision of a mixed use public activity centre that residents can conveniently walk to in order to help meet the daily needs of life without driving outside the area.

In a typical scenario, a resident may choose to walk to the centre in the morning, drop off children at the daycare or school, and take the bus to work. On the return journey, this resident could end their bus trip again at the centre where a food store could provide for needed daily items, before picking up children and walking home. In the evening, the centre remains a hub of activity for organized sports, leisure activities and retail uses. In today’s suburbs, few of these choices could be made and certainly the combination of these trips without the use of a car is unlikely.

Retail is a major element of the community centre and, to a lesser extent, the neighbourhood node. It would not locate or survive at internal community centres if ad hoc higher order shopping (a regional or sector centre, e.g., Deer Valley Shopping Centre, or a warehouse food store) was allowed to locate at the confluence of many communities. Residents would simply drive the short distance to the larger shopping venue. It is recommended no new higher order shopping centres be located within 3.2 km (2 mi) of a community centre if the local retail is to survive.

Policy C.2

The community centre and neighbourhood nodes must be located strategically and should be as central as possible, while recognizing topographical constraints.

Public Benefit Intended

a) To allow all residents convenient access to major community facilities.

b) To foster a community and neighbourhood focus.

c) To shorten all trips within the community.

Acceptable Performance

a) Locate the community centre within a comfortable 5 minute (400 m) walk for as many people as possible; car, bus and bicycle travel is likely beyond that.

b) Locate the neighbourhood node within a 5 minute direct walk from the furthest house in the neighbourhood it serves.

² For a discussion of commercial square footage targets, site sizes and parking requirements, refer to the analysis at the end of this section.
Design Guidelines

The following guidelines are suggestions to be considered when planning new communities.

a) Local streets leading to the community centre and neighbourhood nodes should be as pedestrian-friendly as possible.

b) There should be a number of direct linkages that allow residents a choice of routes to community centres, as opposed to a hierarchy of streets that funnel vehicle traffic onto a collector loop.

Discussion

The location of the community centre and neighbourhood nodes is key to encouraging resident access which ultimately determines whether the site will be well used or not. Typically, in auto-oriented suburbs, a small retail site locates on a collector or at a busy corner near a main community access point in order to catch the traffic coming and going. Such sites are not convenient to walk to for most residents, given the circuitous street network and their edge locations. In order to be seen as community focal points, community centres should be as central as possible and serve as the hub of a converging street network.

Policy C.3

A mix of both public and private activities must be located in and around the community centre and neighbourhood nodes.

Public Benefit Intended

a) To reduce the need to drive outside the community for daily needs.

b) To provide a greater variety of activities in close proximity, in order to combine trips.

c) To provide local employment.

d) To achieve activity at all times, providing security and safety.

Acceptable Performance

a) Incorporate a food store site into the community centre to allow a 2,800 sq. m (±30,000 sq ft) development.

b) Integrate transit stops with the community centre and neighbourhood nodes.

c) Provide a range of supportive retail, commercial and public uses to satisfy many of the daily needs of the resident population.

Design Guidelines

The following guidelines are suggestions to be considered when planning new communities.

a) The key to community centre viability is a range and mix of uses to attract residents to the site for a variety of purposes. Typically, a site may contain public spaces, schools, daycare, a transit stop, community facilities, public services, a clinic, post office, office uses, a variety of retail, etc. In planning the site, consideration should be given as to how the mix of uses might vary if, after the community is substantially built-out, there proves to be insufficient demand for all the recommended retail.

b) Opportunities for housing should be explored. For example, seniors' housing or mixed use residential could be located over retail uses.

c) Permitted Uses, Certainty of Use, and a Direct Control designation for specific uses should be considered as ways to encourage the mix of activities.

d) Higher density housing should be located around the community centre and neighbourhood nodes in order to maximize the number of residents within the shortest walking distance. Higher density around transit facilities is also desirable.
Discussion

A vibrant and viable centre will only be achieved with a diverse mix of land uses, including retail, to draw a variety of residents for different purposes, as well as to combine trips for various needs. It is felt that a supermarket is a critical use around which other retail uses would locate. It should be of sufficient size to attract residents for their daily needs and weekly shopping. Without a supermarket, residents will drive outside of the community to higher-order shopping centres and will satisfy other retail needs during the same trip. A food store, therefore, is key to reducing the need to drive and the length of trip, and to provide the anchor to other activities in the community centre.

In addition to the commercial component, other public uses such as open space, schools, public services, a transit stop, and a community facility should locate at the centre to provide a critical commercial and civic mix that becomes the area’s focus. The mix of uses helps soften the results of downturns in the economy when various commercial enterprises may come and go, allowing the centre to successfully adapt while continuing to function.

Policy C.4

Community centre and neighbourhood node site designs must encourage pedestrian and bicycle access and transit use.

Public Benefit Intended

a) To encourage the use and enjoyment of community centre activities by pedestrians, transit-users and cyclists.

Acceptable Performance

a) Reduce parking requirements for community centre commercial from 5.5 stalls per 93 sq. m (1,000 sq ft) of gross leasable area (GLA) to a range of 4 to 4.5 stalls.

b) Locate at least one retail access point, combined with shelter and complementary uses, so as to front onto the street adjacent to a transit stop.

c) In a shopping centre or main street configuration, locate parking primarily to the side and rear of the site.

d) In the community centre and neighbourhood nodes, front a substantial proportion of commercial onto the street, with minimal setbacks.

Design Guidelines

The following guidelines are suggestions to be considered when designing new communities.

a) Supermarkets in community centres should have side or rear parking whenever possible, in order to maintain the continuity of the pedestrian street environment.

b) Shared and/or on-street parking should be considered where there is a mix of uses with a staggered peak period of demand. Commercial on-street parking should not be allowed on streets with residential frontages.

c) Site design should be such that pedestrians do not have to cross a parking lot to get from a sidewalk or transit stop to shops and services.

d) In a ‘main street’ configuration, building frontage should be continuous and pedestrian-unfriendly gaps, such as wide parking lots, avoided.

e) Community centre and neighbourhood nodes should be at the hub of local roads.
• Storefronts should be narrow, incorporating window frontage, awnings for shelter, and recessed doorways.

g) Exterior landscaping should be provided for pedestrian shelter and visual relief.

h) Bicycle parking should be provided on-site.

i) At the community centre, sidewalk widths should be as follows:
   - a minimum of 2 m (6.6 ft) where street parking is parallel; and
   - a minimum of 2.5 m (8.2 ft) where parking is angled at 90°.

j) Street frontage building height should be no more than the right-of-way width on which it fronts.

Discussion
Pedestrian-friendliness, bicycle use and convenient transit access are important for the community centre and neighbourhood nodes to function as destinations, rather than as a quick stop in the car. Reduced and relocated parking, reduced setbacks, and careful design should be used to soften the commercial/residential interface.

A central location for the community centre means more convenient access for more people. This, as well as pedestrian-friendly site development and a converging road network, allows a reduction in parking requirements since more people will walk or cycle to the centre and take transit once there.

A large auto-oriented shopping centre with the City's current parking standards does not belong at the centre of a suburban community. But a site designed to encourage and accommodate modes of travel other than the car will allow choice for residents and achieve the important Calgary Transportation Plan (May 1995) objective of reducing the need to drive.

Policy C.5
Compatible home occupations should be encouraged.

Public Benefit Intended
a) To increase the jobs/population ratio in the community, thereby reducing work trips outside the community, traffic congestion and vehicle emissions.

b) To support local businesses catering to people working out of their homes.

c) To foster a safer community through a daytime resident/worker presence.

Acceptable Performance
No specific performance requirements.

Design Guidelines
No specific guidelines.

Discussion
Encouraging home occupations recognizes this significant trend in our society, and helps reduce vehicle work trips outside the community, particularly during rush hour. Benefits include reduced peak hour vehicle emissions and reduced downstream traffic congestion. Home-based work also benefits the community by increasing the all-day resident and worker presence, resulting in a safer environment, and providing an all-day market for local commercial areas.

The Calgary Land Use By-law distinguishes between Class 1 and 2 Home Occupations. Class 1 activities are those of minimal impact, with three or less business associated visits per week. Class 2 refers to activities of more moderate impact, with three or more visits per week, and can include personal service businesses. Class 1 Home Occupations are Permitted Uses in all