

Chapter 6 Urban Design

6.1 INTRODUCTION

6.1.1 Background & Scope

Urban design is not merely a set of urban aesthetic guidelines but rather encompasses land use and design elements which enhance the livability of the community. Urban design is a grouping of concepts and guidelines which are used to describe the image or character of the City's environment.

Urban design concepts tend to fall into two distinct categories, relating to:

- The location of different land uses throughout the City and their relationship to one another. (For example, Policies UD-1.1 to UD-1.5 define relationships between commercial, residential, and public land uses and the planned circulation system which links them with one another.)
- The visual character and appearance of individual buildings, sites, and districts. (Policy UD-2.2 and the "Merced Urban Design Guidelines" pages throughout this chapter provide aesthetic guidelines for development.)

In attempting to influence the type, location, and character of both private and public

development, urban design policies provide the tools to help create a desirable relationship between new and existing development.

Within the *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan*, the urban design focus for new growth areas is primarily defined by the Urban Village concept (mixed use, pedestrian and transit-friendly neighborhoods). At a city-wide scale, this urban design concept defines the relationship between various parts of the City, linked together by open space and transportation corridors.

At the neighborhood scale, the Urban Village concept results in development of commercial centers surrounded by residential areas, open space, and public facilities. At the project scale, this concept is intended to provide ideas which can be applied to solve a number of design problems and promote long-term, livable community development.

The goal is to build an environmentally and economically "sustainable" city. A "sustainable city" is a city designed, constructed, and operated to efficiently use land and other natural resources, minimize waste, and manage and conserve resources for the use of present and future generations.

A “sustainable” community is one where:

- 1) Housing, schools, shopping areas, and other things which meet most of the daily needs of residents are located within walking distance of one another;
- 2) Higher population densities are located around transit stops to provide the critical mass of people and activities needed to make transit economically viable;
- 3) Housing provides places to live for a variety of people within a single neighborhood; and,
- 4) Mixed use and transit friendly commercial and employment centers are promoted.

Such a community makes efficient use of land and promotes alternative modes of transportation, thus helping to preserve both our air quality and our quality of life. These same characteristics can also be used to describe many of Merced’s older neighborhoods.

6.1.2 Relationship to State Law

Urban design is of critical importance to the decisions that are made regarding general growth and development of a city. Although not a “required element” under state planning law, “good” urban design is the overall purpose of the planning process.

6.1.3 Relationship to Other General Plan Chapters

Within the *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan*, the Urban Design Chapter focuses on the Urban Village concept. Village development will be guided by the principles in this Urban Design Chapter. Other chapters of the General Plan, especially the Land Use Chapter, reflect the community

planning principles described in the Urban Design Chapter. Within all of the General Plan chapters, the idea of a “sustainable city” and the design principles for pedestrian- and transit-friendly development have been given specific application in the form of goals, policies and actions relating to the chapter subject area. Overall community appearance has also been addressed, primarily in Policy UD-2.2.

6.2 GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The *Urban Village* and other land use and design concepts have been implemented in the *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan* through the following guiding principles:

- ***Conserve natural resource areas that give form and character to the community.*** The policies contained in the Open Space, Conservation & Recreation Chapter, as well as others, provide for strengthening the visual and physical connection between the City and its natural elements. The Urban Expansion Chapter guides future City growth away from important resource areas to the extent feasible.



- **Promote an urban form that integrates housing, shops, work places, schools, parks and civic facilities.** The Urban Village development approach, as set forth in the Land Use Chapter and Land Use Diagram, is the primary means of implementing this principle. Within this land use pattern, development is to be guided by the principles contained in this Urban Design Chapter. Land use planning needs to address long-term as well as short-term needs for a variety of residential, commercial, and industrial land uses.



- **Reinforce the elements of the community which give Merced its unique identity.** Through purposeful acts of community building at the City's inception, Merced developed into an attractive community. The Village development concept expands on these successful early planning efforts to assure that future growth and development retains Merced's unique character.
- **Expand the City's non-vehicular transportation network.** Through provisions contained in the Transportation and Circulation Chapter

and supporting policies in other chapters of this Plan, the City's extensive system of bike and pedestrian paths will expand to serve new growth and development.



- **Promote convenient pedestrian and vehicular access to transit, commercial, recreation and residential places.** The success of the City's urban design approach relies on private development which provides convenient vehicular access but is also pedestrian-friendly. This Urban Design Chapter proposes various design approaches which will improve access and encourage walking and bicycling as viable transportation options.
- **Reinforce the Downtown as a focus point in the City.** Downtown Merced plays an important role in the social and economic well being of the community. As the seat of government for Merced County, Downtown supports a regional government center. Additionally, the Downtown area is the direct access point to regional highway and railway networks. Policies contained in the various chapters of this plan strengthen the role and function of Merced's Downtown.

- ***Conserve the special qualities of existing neighborhoods and districts.*** The distinctive character of Merced’s older residential neighborhoods is one of the most memorable features of the community. The Land Use Chapter of this plan provides policies for maintaining these qualities. The policies and design proposals of this Urban Design Chapter provide a basis for developing these qualities in new and expanding neighborhoods.



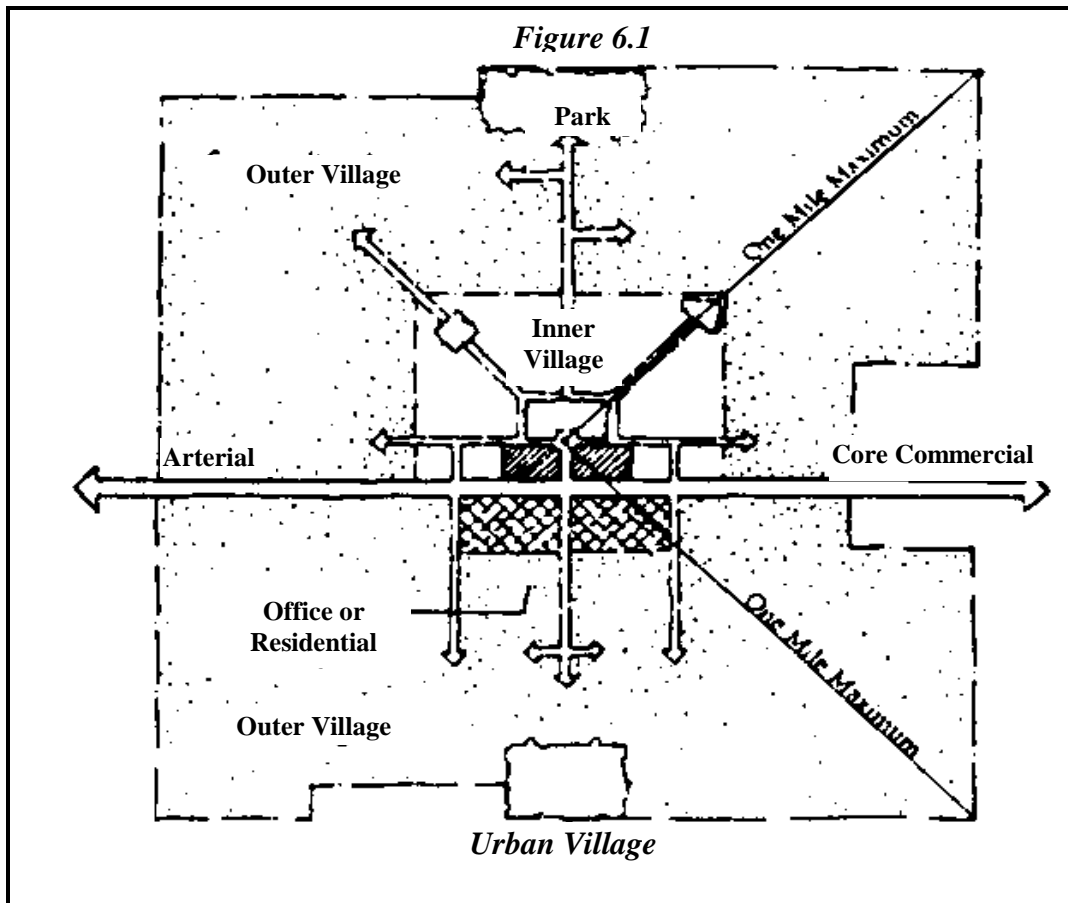
- ***Focus residential, commercial and employment center development to encourage public transit use.*** Successful urban centers of the future will be designed to accommodate local and regional public transportation systems. This public transit focus is a central theme of the City’s urban design concept. Urban design policies which facilitate transit friendly development as well as convenient vehicular access are contained in the Land Use, Transportation, and Urban Design Chapters of the *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan*.
- ***Maximize the use of City streets as public spaces.*** The streets of Merced comprise the major open spaces of the City and are among its liveliest public

spaces. Design considerations should focus on providing convenient automobile access to residential, commercial, employment, and public areas while accommodating other forms of transportation as well. Policies contained in the Transportation and Circulation Chapter, along with the design concepts developed in the Urban Design Chapter, are aimed at balancing the need for auto movement and parking with the need for the street system to accommodate other vital community activities.

- ***Assure that development takes place in a balanced manner in order to promote the economic vitality of evolving areas.*** The development of Urban Villages will be a cooperative effort between the City, landowners, and the development community. Villages will likely be developed over a number of years and, thus, will need close coordination between these groups to assure that the desired mixture of land uses is achieved and development costs remain low. It should be noted, however, that the majority of the Villages will be available for traditional single-family development but with a transit and pedestrian focus.

6.3 URBAN DESIGN GUIDELINES

The Urban Design Chapter, unlike other chapters of this Plan, also contains design guidelines that are not in the form of goals, policies or actions. These guidelines, contained in the “Urban Design Guidelines” sections of this Chapter, are provided as suggestions for architects and designers and are not mandatory requirements.



6.4 MERCED'S URBAN VILLAGES (TRANSIT READY DEVELOPMENT)

In 1990, *Merced 2030-How Should We Grow?* analyzed the various growth and expansion options available to the City. As a result of this study, it was determined that Merced's growth pattern for new growth areas should be based on mixed use, pedestrian- and transit-friendly design principles, simply known as the "Urban Village Concept."

As a follow-up to this planning process, the City commissioned a more refined urban design study for an 8,000-acre portion of the

"Northern City" which resulted in the publication of the *North Merced Conceptual Land Use Plan* and *Merced Villages Design Guidelines* in late 1991. This publication established the basic "urban design" policy direction that was used in the preparation of the *Merced Vision 2015 General Plan* in 1997. This *Merced Vision 2030 General Plan* continues to utilize the same Urban Village design principles.

Application of "Urban Village" design principles will be encouraged in all new growth areas of the City, including North Merced, Southwest Merced, and South Merced.

The fundamental building block for the Land Use Plan in new growth areas is the *Urban Village*, a compact, mixed-use district that encourage pedestrian and transit travel, which is also referred to “Transit Ready Development” instead of “Transit-Oriented Development.” This is because Transit-Oriented Development generally refers to light rail or more extensive public transit systems while “Transit Ready Development” is more descriptive of a City such as Merced where the transit options haven’t yet been as fully developed. By utilizing the Urban Village Concept, the City will be designed to accommodate these kinds of transit options in the future, however.

The following sections describe the basic components of a “village.”

6.4.1 Inner Villages

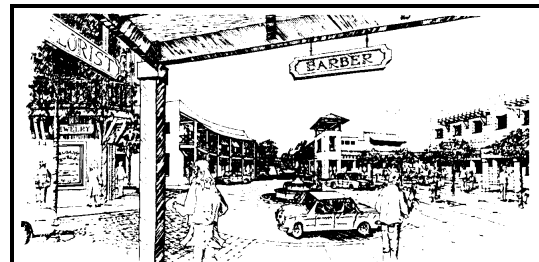
The *Inner Village* is a mixed-use community within an average 1/4 mile walking distance of a transit stop and *Core Commercial* area. All Inner-Villages include a mixture of parks, shops, medium-density residences, and civic uses. Inner Villages combine these uses within a comfortable walking distance, making it convenient for residents and employees to travel by transit, bicycle or foot as well as by car.

A Merced example of an “Inner Village” would be the area surrounding the College Green Shopping Center at Olive and G. Higher-density apartments surround the commercial center and are directly connected to the center through a pedestrian walkway and College Green Drive.

6.4.2 Core Commercial Areas

Each village must have a mixed-use *Core Commercial* area located immediately adjacent to the medium-density

neighborhoods (*Village Core Residential areas*--see below). At a minimum, the Core area should provide convenience retail and civic sites. Larger cores may also include major supermarkets, professional offices, day care, restaurants, service commercial, entertainment uses, comparison retail and other retail stores. A transit stop and village green should be located in the Inner Village near the commercial and residential areas.



6.4.3 Village Core Residential Areas

“*Village Core Residential*” is the land use category applied to the residential areas that are within a convenient walking distance (about 1/4 mile) from the Core Commercial area and transit stop. (On the Land Use Diagram, this category is simply labeled “*Village Residential*.”) These areas are built at densities high enough to support the commercial area and transit use. Together, the *Core Commercial* and *Village Core Residential* areas make up the *Inner Village*. An average minimum gross density of 10 dwelling units per acre (du/ac) will allow a mix of small lot single-family, townhouses and apartments in Village Core Residential areas.

All Village Core Residential areas should be pedestrian in scale, ranging from slightly under to slightly over one-quarter mile in radius and should provide direct and easy access to Core Commercial areas and transit stops. Village Core Residential areas may contain a variety of housing types and ownerships, ranging from small lot single-

family homes to apartment buildings, as long as the overall average gross density of the Inner Village is at least 10 du/ac. While housing diversity is desirable, this density requirement could be achieved using only a single-family product--small lots with ancillary units.

6.4.4 Outer Village Areas

Less compact areas surrounding the Inner Villages contain lower density housing, offices, schools, and open space. These areas are known as the *Outer Village*. The Outer Villages are tied to the Inner Villages by a local network of connector streets so that perimeter arterials and thoroughfares are not relied upon for local travel, thereby reducing demand on these roads and providing safe paths for pedestrians and bicyclists. This circulation system is a key component of Village developments.



The Outer Village Area is intended to provide lower-density uses that are not appropriate in the Inner Village because they are not sufficiently compact and are more reliant on the automobile. Outer Village areas are designated for single-family and office uses (only along arterials across from Core Commercial areas) that will help support the Core Commercial businesses and transit service. “Low Density Residential,” which allows single-family

residences (see Chapter 3), is the land use category that will be applied to most of the Outer Village areas.

These Outer Village areas make up the majority of the land available in the Village areas. (Of each one- square-mile Village, approximately two-thirds of that area will be the Outer Village.) These areas will be much like traditional single-family neighborhoods, except they will have more of a pedestrian- and transit-friendly atmosphere.

Public schools and parks that provide services to both the Outer Village and Inner Village should be located in the Outer Village near the boundary of the Inner Village.

6.4.5 Open Space, Parks & Plazas

The location of parks, plazas and trails should be coordinated to distribute a variety of recreation opportunities throughout the growth area. Growth areas should contain a network of open space including community parks, neighborhood parks, village parks, village greens, plazas and an inter-connected ‘greenway’ trail system. (Refer to Section 7.2.2 for more details.)



6.5 URBAN DESIGN GOALS, POLICIES, AND ACTIONS

Goal Area UD-1: Transit Ready Development or Urban Villages

GOALS

- **An Integrated Urban Form**
- **Transit-Ready Community Design**
- **Pedestrian- and Bicycle-Compatible Neighborhoods**

POLICIES

- UD-1.1** Apply Transit-Ready Development or Urban Village design principles to new development in the City's new growth areas.
- UD-1.2** Distribute and design Urban Villages to promote convenient vehicular, pedestrian, and transit access.
- UD-1.3** Promote and facilitate Core Commercial design principles in Village commercial areas.
- UD-1.4** Promote and facilitate Urban Village residential area design principles.
- UD-1.5** Design and develop public and quasi-public buildings and uses utilizing Transit-Ready Development or Urban Village principles.

Policy UD-1.1

Apply Transit-Ready Development or Urban Village Design Principles to New Development in the City's New Growth Areas.

The fundamental building block of the Plan is the Village, a compact, mixed-use district that will accommodate projected growth, maintain Merced's present quality of life and help ensure its continued economic vitality. Villages achieve these goals by encouraging pedestrian and transit travel, and by minimizing single-use, low density developments that generate traffic congestion, air pollution, a scarcity of affordable housing, monotonous landscapes and poor utilization of environmental and land resources. The City of Merced has established the "Urban Village" model (also known as "Transit Ready Development") as the basic design concept governing urban form in new growth areas. Its principles should be applied as much as feasible in new growth areas throughout the Merced urban area.

Implementing Actions:

- 1.1.a** The focus of new development will be the "Urban Village," which are mixed-use, pedestrian- and transit-friendly communities within a one-square mile area.

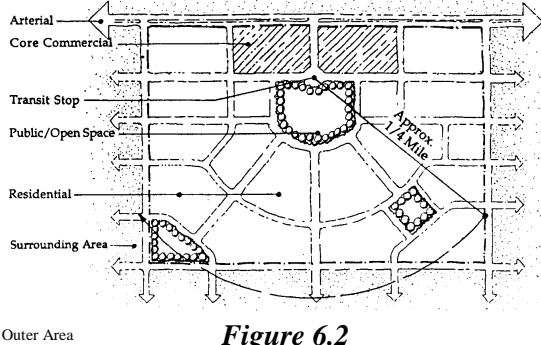
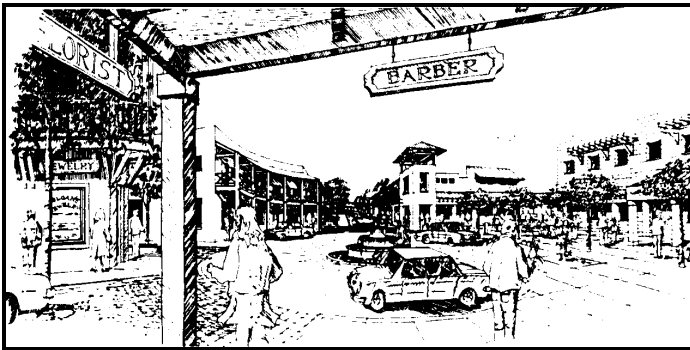


Figure 6.2
"Inner Village"

Villages should include a mixture of parks, shops, a variety of housing types, and civic uses. Villages combine these uses within a convenient distance, making it easier for residents and employees to travel by transit, bicycle or foot as well as by car. Village sites should be located on or near planned transit segments and provide a physical environment that encourages pedestrian and transit travel.

1.1.b Each village shall have a mixed-use "Core Commercial" area located immediately adjacent to Village Core Residential neighborhoods.



At a minimum, plans for designated Core areas should provide convenience retail and civic sites. Larger cores may also include major supermarkets, professional offices, day care, restaurants, service commercial, comparison retail and other retail stores located adjacent to the transit stop. Optional upper floor office and residential uses in the Core

Commercial area increases the mixed-use, round-the-clock nature of the Core area. A transit stop and village green should be located between commercial uses and Village Core Residential areas.

Three kinds of Core Commercial areas may occur:

- Convenience Centers — providing a convenience "mini-market" with some ancillary retail (typically 3-10 acres);
- Neighborhood Centers — providing a supermarket with an additional anchor store, major ancillary retail and professional offices (typically 10-20 acres); or,
- Community Center — providing a supermarket and drugstore, ancillary retail, professional offices and additional anchors such as junior department stores and health clubs (ranging from 20-60 acres).

1.1.c "Village Core Residential Areas" (part of the "Inner Villages") shall include residences that are within a convenient walking distance from Core Commercial areas and transit stops, and are built at densities high enough to help support them.

Village designs should incorporate an average minimum gross density of 10 dwelling units per acre (du/ac) which will allow a mix of small lot single-family, townhomes and apartments in Village Core Residential areas. All Village Core Residential areas should be pedestrian in scale, ranging from slightly under to slightly over one-quarter mile in radius and should provide direct and easy access to Core Commercial areas and transit stops.

Village Core Residential areas may contain a variety of housing types and ownership options, ranging from small lot single-family homes to apartment buildings, as long as the overall average gross density of the Village is at least 10 du/ac. (Gross densities calculations should include the area in lots as well as in streets and alleys immediately in front and behind the lots). While housing diversity is desirable, this density requirement could be achieved using only a single-family product — small lots with carriage (ancillary) units. Small village parks should be provided as an urban amenity within these denser Village Core Residential areas.

1.1.d Each Village will have an “Outer Village” adjacent to it which includes lands no further than one mile from the Core Commercial area.

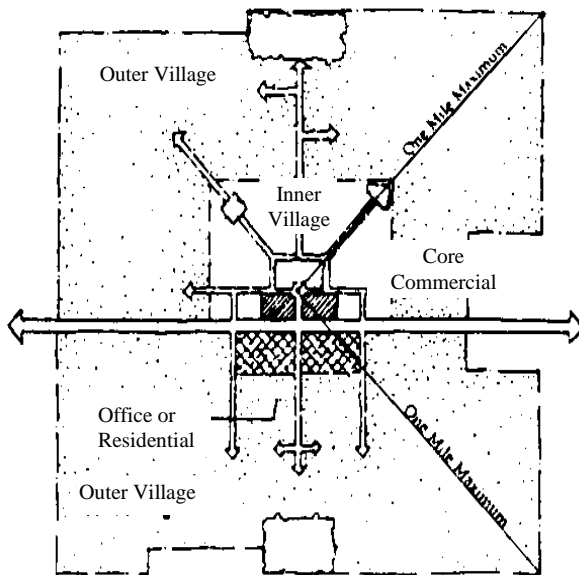


Figure 6.3
Urban Village

Site plans for the “Outer Village” street network must provide multiple direct street and bicycle connections to the center without use of an arterial street. Outer Villages may have lower density housing, public schools, community parks, limited areas of office uses, and park-and-ride lots.

The Outer Village is intended to provide uses that are not appropriate in the Inner Villages, because they are not sufficiently compact and are more reliant on the automobile. Public schools and parks that provide services to both the Inner and Outer Village should be located in Outer Villages near the boundary of the Inner Village.

Commercial uses that are very similar in nature and market appeal to those located in the Village's Core Commercial area are generally not allowed in Outer Villages because they diminish the viability of the Village's retail center, although professional office uses may be located on the opposite side of the arterial across from the Village Core Commercial Area.

1.1.e The location of parks, plazas, and trails should be coordinated to distribute a variety of recreation opportunities throughout the area.

The Urban Village area should contain a network of open space including community parks, neighborhood parks, village parks, village greens, plazas and an interconnected “greenway” trail system. Bicycle and pedestrian trails should be created along major creeks, high-voltage power lines, transitways, and along the abandoned Yosemite Valley Railroad (YVRR) railroad bed in North Merced to provide easy access to parks and schools that should be located along them.

1.1.f Uses which rely extensively upon autos or trucks are encouraged to locate in Business Park or other commercial areas along major transportation corridors.

An important concept of Urban Village development is to create areas which are less dependent upon auto and truck transportation than other areas of the City. Many uses typically allowed in commercial areas rely predominantly upon auto travel to generate business patrons. These uses, such as auto dealers and repair shops, mini-storage facilities, travel commercial complexes, and motels, should not be permitted in Villages in most cases. These uses should be accommodated in nearby areas where the street and highway system can support the traffic loads that they generate. For example, such uses are appropriate in business park areas adjacent to Highway 59 in North Merced.

Similarly, light industrial uses should not generally be permitted in Villages except that business park/research & development type uses may be appropriate in those Villages in the northeastern portion of the City near UC Merced. Industrial uses are appropriate, however, where existing industrial activities occur and along major transportation corridors.

- 1.1.g The City will work with individual property owners within the Village areas to assure that development occurs in a balanced manner to assure economic viability of individual projects.**

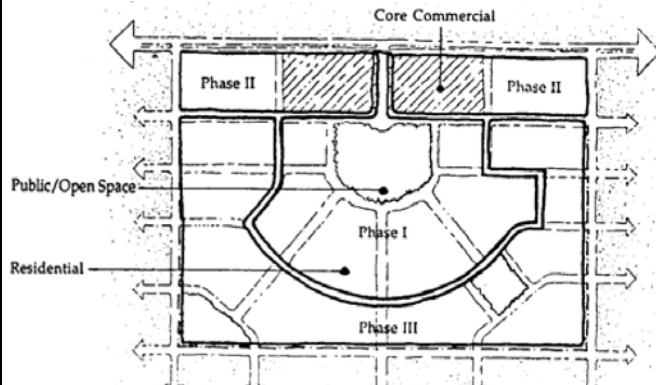


Figure 6.4
Conceptual Phasing of a Village

The growth area must be developed in a balanced phasing pattern. Schools and parks must be dedicated concurrent with commercial and residential uses. Furthermore, areas must be set aside for land uses that will be needed in later phases, but where market demand needs to mature, such as Core Commercial and higher density housing areas. For this reason, development of Villages is seen as a cooperative effort between the City, landowners and the development community.

Villages represent relatively large projects which may be executed over several years. The phasing of the project is critical to its success, both as a financial undertaking and as a mechanism to encourage transit use. In order to encourage the public service agencies to provide public facilities in a timely manner to serve the needs of residents, developers are asked to dedicate sites designated for public uses concurrent with development of commercial and residential uses. Developers should also work with the City to ensure that the recommended mixture of land uses is achieved in a timely manner and development costs remain low.

- 1.1.h Develop special “Urban Village” design principles to encourage more job-generating uses within the Urban Villages.**

Special “Urban Village” designs should be developed to provide for increased opportunities for job-based land uses attracted by a university climate in some Urban Villages, especially in the northwestern area of the City, while still maintaining the basic concept of mixed-use, pedestrian and transit oriented communities. These “Urban Villages” may differ from others in the Community in the mixture of business park, research and development, office, public/cultural uses, and retail uses within the Village Core areas instead of the retail/office/public facilities focus of other Villages which are more residential in nature.

Policy UD-1.2

Distribute and Design Urban Villages to Promote Convenient Vehicular, Pedestrian, and Transit Access.

Villages should be distributed throughout the City's growth area in a pattern that allows the greatest number of residents access to a variety of shopping opportunities. Villages should be distributed to permit residents to walk to retail and public facilities without having to cross an arterial street. Villages should also be located to take advantage of main transit lines and existing retail market demand.

The Urban Village circulation system encourages all modes of travel, while providing adequate access for automobile traffic. This street pattern is achieved by providing multiple routes to destinations without relying on arterials. This pattern of multiple routes keeps traffic volumes lower on individual connector streets and allows pedestrians and bicyclists to avoid unfriendly arterials. This pattern also favors pedestrians by slowing traffic, reducing pavement, and improving the sense of shelter afforded by houses and trees. Within the Urban Village development concept, local and connector streets should be designed to discourage through traffic, while still providing an interconnected and a legible circulation network.

Implementing Actions:

1.2.a Villages should be located to maximize access to their Core Commercial areas from their adjacent neighborhoods without relying on arterials.

Villages with major retail centers should be spaced at least one mile apart and should be distributed to serve various growth sub-areas. Generally, there should be one Village for each full square mile bound by arterials, except in rural residential areas.

1.2.b The boundary of each village varies with the size of the Core Commercial area and does not extend across arterials.

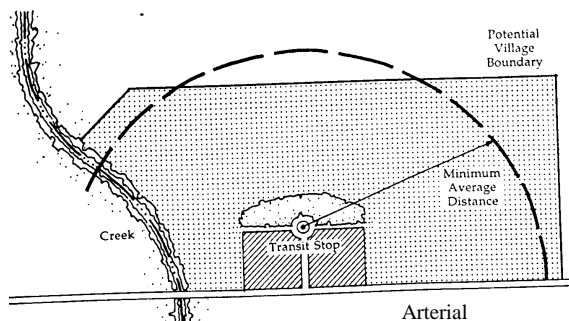


Figure 6.5
Village Boundaries

While the shape of the Village may vary, the size of the Inner Village should not be less than the area described by the quarter-mile walking distance radius (ranging from 1200 to 1600 feet) from the transit stop and core commercial area.

The minimum size of an Inner Village should vary according to the kind of Core Commercial area within the Village; larger Villages are associated with larger Core Commercial areas. The minimum distance requirement does not apply to areas with

major intervening features such as major creeks and high-voltage power lines, where the boundary should follow the major feature.

Inner Villages should typically be at least 100 acres when associated with a Community Center, 70 acres when associated with a Neighborhood Center, and 50 acres when associated with a Convenience Center.

1.2.c Building intensities and densities should meet the minimum requirements set forth for a Village to promote more active centers, support transit, and encourage pedestrian-oriented development that fronts onto the street.

Compared with other Village areas, the Inner Villages should have the highest commercial intensities (the amount of building relative to the size of the site) and the highest residential densities (the number of dwelling units in a given area). Core Commercial areas should be intensive enough to provide a "main street" shopping spine. Multi-storied buildings and structured parking are strongly encouraged near transit stops to better utilize the lands adjacent to the transit line and to provide additional transit ridership. A development pattern is encouraged where densities are highest at the center of the Village and become lower as the distance from the center increases. Thus higher density housing types such as apartments and townhouses are most appropriate adjacent to the Core, with lower density single family housing placed further out.

1.2.d The Village street system should provide multiple and parallel routes between the Core Commercial area and the rest of the Village. In no case shall trips which could be internal to a square mile bound by arterials be forced onto an arterial.

The collector street pattern should be simple and memorable. Winding roads, dead end streets and cul-de-sacs that cut off direct access to Village Centers should be discouraged in Village Core Residential Areas, but may be appropriate in some Outer Village areas. Streets should converge near common destinations that contribute to an area's unique identity, such as transit stops, Core Commercial areas, schools and parks

The street system should allow autos, bikes, and pedestrians to travel on small local streets to any location in the Village. At no time should an arterial street be the only preferable route to and from the Inner Village and its Outer Village.

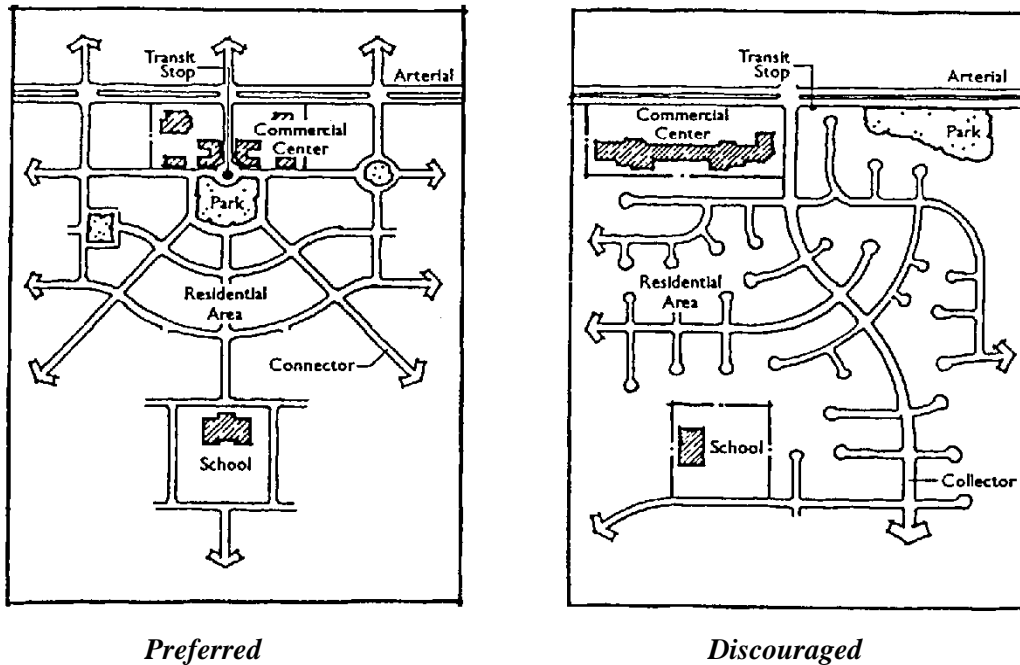


Figure 6.6
Village Street Systems

1.2.e Arterial streets should allow efficient conveyance of through traffic and must not pass through Villages.

The paved width of arterials should provide for safety, efficiency and long term needs. The regional traffic circulation system is dependent upon an efficient and smooth-flowing network of arterials. The required right-of-way for arterials varies with anticipated need. (Refer to Chapter 4, Circulation Map.)

1.2.f Collector and local streets should connect the Inner and Outer Village to Core Commercial areas, schools, and community parks without the use of arterials.

In general, Collectors should be designed to carry moderate levels of local traffic smoothly, in a way that is compatible with bicycle and foot traffic. A network of collectors should provide alternative paths to destinations within the Village for neighborhood residents. The collector network should not provide a speedy through-route alternative to arterials. "T" intersections and "dog leg" alignments could be used to reduce through traffic and reduce speeds. The precise alignment of collectors will be determined as individual projects are designed.

Collectors should contain bikeways. Driveway cuts should be minimized and alley access to rear garages is encouraged to minimize potential conflicts among autos and bicyclists, and for the convenience of residents along collectors. Collectors and some local streets should be aligned along the edge of parks and open space to enhance the aesthetic character of the streets and sidewalks.

1.2.g The pedestrian and bicycle system must provide clear and direct access to the Core Commercial area and the transit stop.

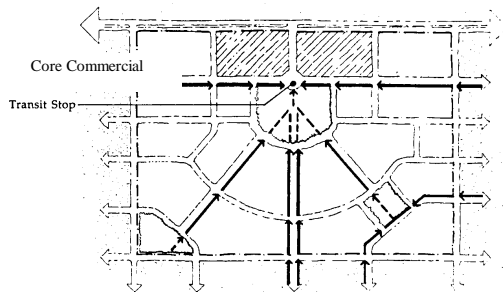


Figure 6.7
Pedestrian & Bicycle System

Although the street and sidewalk system will accommodate many destinations within Villages, the primary destination will be the Commercial Core and transit stop. Direct paths to the transit stop should be lined with activities and be shaded. The configuration of parking, shopping and pedestrian routes should reinforce access to transit. A feeling of safety for pedestrians and bicyclists can be provided through the use of park strips between the curb and the sidewalk or bike path which provide separation from auto traffic.