Redesigning Commercial Strips

How to improve both traffic and retail performance along old commercial strips.

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THE LOCAL HIGHWAY lined with franchise restaurants, strip shopping centers, car dealerships, and all sorts of other commercial development is so common in the United States that most people assume it has been created by market forces. But the commercial strip is actually a zoning concept, derived from an outmoded model adopted long ago by most local governments.

Small-town shopping had always been organized along a main street, and up through the 1920s—when zoning districts first began to be mapped—streetcars helped create continuous commercial frontages along important traffic arteries in big cities. After World War II, when cities and suburbs began expanding, the zoning districts originally devised for main streets and streetcar streets were mapped along suburban and rural highways. At first, this pattern had advantages, creating sites with plenty of parking for businesses that had been constricted by downtown locations. Strip zoning helped empty out traditional downtowns, especially in small communities, where much commercial activity migrated out to the "bypass." In most places, the only available retail locations, and most office and hotel sites, were along commercial strips or in traditional downtowns. The market has had little choice.

DYSFUNCTIONAL COMMERCIAL STRIP ZONING

Today many real-estate investors and planners, especially transportation planners, are coming to believe that the strip-zoning pattern has been a mistake, because it creates two incompatible functions. The highway's original purpose is to connect one place with another; and, in many suburban areas, such connections are scarce and badly needed. At the same time, the highway is being used for access to individual stores and other businesses. The more people make left turns into businesses along the strip, the more congested the traffic becomes. At the same time, even short trips between different destinations along the strip usually have to take place on the highway. Eventually the highway ceases to function well as a traffic route, while access to each business becomes more and more difficult. Much of the worst suburban gridlock takes place along commercially zoned arterials.

Highway departments are under ever-growing pressure to do something about traffic congestion. The option most easily available is to widen a highway, but widening can deprive highway-oriented businesses of the synergy that comes from participating in the same commercial location. This problem is generally thought to begin when there are more than three lanes in each direction. Highway improvements can also create other problems for local businesses. Transportation engineers want medians that restrict left turns, and recommend that right turns between intersections be as few as possible. Such changes can reduce access to an individual property to only half the passing traffic, or less if the only access is from a service road.

Meanwhile, the retail market suddenly has many new options. Catalog and Internet shopping have become significant alternatives to traditional trips to retail stores, and no one is sure how far these trends are going. Established retailers, in addition to starting their own Internet sites, are paying much more attention to making shopping a pleasant and interesting experience for people who shop at their stores. There has been a modest revival of traditional street-front retail in downtowns, where it is possible to walk along a sidewalk from store to store, and where offices, apartments, and other destinations make for a more lively environment. There has also been a trend toward creating a downtown experience in "park-once" shopping developments, which are laid out along internal streets. The use of the term "town center" for a shopping development, whether it resembles a traditional town center or not, is an indicator of this new direction in the retail market. Another evident trend is toward bigger retail malls, which include entertainment and restaurants, and can create an experience comparable to going to a downtown.

Much of the existing development along commercial strips cannot compete with the new malls, town centers, and revived downtown retail districts. Strip-commercial zoning districts are narrow, sometimes as shallow as 100 feet back from the highway, and seldom more than a few hundred feet deep. Most communities have ample amounts of commercial land zoned in strips along highways, which has encouraged development to spread out into many small, inefficient buildings. But there is seldom much commercially zoned land at any one place. What there is has been divided among multiple owners. There is little opportunity to create street-front retail and mixed-use centers. Instead, many strip-commercial highways are showing signs of the deterioration that happened in older downtowns long ago: empty stores, sometimes entire empty centers, and many marginal tenants. At the same time, a few old-style commercial strips are redeveloping into almost urban commercial corridors, with multi-story office buildings, malls, hotels, and entertainment retail destinations. Here the problems are those of too much success: heavy traffic congestion, not enough parking, and difficulties with access and with getting from one destination to another.

WHAT TO DO?

It was an easy political decision to map commercial frontages along busy streets and highways, since it meant a potential increase in property values for owners. Commercial zoning for miles of frontages meant no landowner was left out. It took a generation or more for the full effect of these decisions to become visible, so there was little opposition at the time, except in higher-income residential districts where property owners, not interested in selling-out and moving, objected to traffic generation and the intrusion of outsiders. Where local highways do not have commercial frontages, it is often because they run through a high-income neighborhood.

The commercial strip has been created by land-use regulation, and new types of regulation will be needed to correct it. But this time around, the decisions may well generate controversy and will be more difficult to make. Property owners with commercial zoning continue to expect future profits, even if these expectations are not realistic. Reducing zoning potential can be a political problem, and may, perhaps, be a legal problem as well. So, if commercial-strip zoning was a mistake, what can local communities do about it?

Commercial-strip zoning can cover many different situations. In considering remedial action, there are three important questions: what is the market potential for the commercial strip in the future; what are the traffic demands in the highway corridor; and what stage of development has been reached along the strip?

Relating Zoning to Market Potential. What is a reasonable estimate of commercial development along a highway corridor in the next 10 to 25 years and how does that estimate compare with the amount of land already zoned or potentially zoned for commercial uses? The trading area helps describe the market; usually highways in affluent areas will have more potential for higher-intensity development than strips in poorer neighborhoods. The community should use professional real-estate market studies to help it predict the likely amount of development in the next generation and relate it to the development potential of land already zoned. Many communities are grossly over-zoned for commercial uses along highways. Over-zoning not only creates scattered low-density development, but also causes owners to let existing land and buildings run down, waiting for a real-estate pay-off that may well never happen. Other uses, such as multi-family housing, may be more valuable to property owners than some kinds of commercial uses, particularly where future commercial development potential is low, with the apartments oriented to adjacent neighborhoods rather than to the highway.

Relating Zoning to Traffic Patterns and Highway Design. Zoning provides a mechanism for sorting out commercial uses based on traffic generation. Shops, restaurants, and professional offices—the uses that generate the most traffic—can be grouped in one commercial designation, with less-intensive service commercial uses in another. Development that generates the most traffic can then be zoned into the most suitable locations.

Traffic has to stop at important cross-streets anyway, and they are also where significant amounts of traffic enter and leave the highway corridor, so the most intensive commercial development should usually occur near an important cross-street. In many parts of the United States, major cross-streets are spaced a mile apart, because of the original surveyor's grid when the area was first settled. In between the commercial districts located at the cross-streets, access along the highway can be much more severely limited, in accordance with requirements for maintaining traffic speeds. These areas can still be zoned for businesses that can operate from a service road and that do not require immediate highway access.

The design of the highway should vary with the zoning. In high-intensity commercial areas mapped near major intersections, the highway can become more like a street in a town, with buildings close to the street, turn lanes, sidewalks, curbs, and artificial drainage. In between, the highway can be in a landscaped corridor using natural drainage swayles, with center medians to reduce or eliminate left turns and with right turns limited to entrances for service roads, as the uses zoned for this part of the corridor should not need direct visibility and immediate access from the highway.

Relating Zoning and Street Designs to Development Intensity. Finally, what stage has development reached along the strip? A few commercial properties here and there? Fully developed at low density? Developed at low density and deteriorating? Or redeveloping at almost urban densities? The general land-use strategy should remain the same in each case: concentrate commercial development that generates traffic at important cross-streets, and promote lower-density development and other land uses in between—but each set of circumstances requires different means of implementation to correct past mistakes in regulating commercial corridors. It may be that more commercially zoned land should be mapped at highly accessible locations near important intersections. High-intensity commercial corridors have the potential to be supported by mass transit: first by buses, and later, if usage warrants, by light-rail or even heavy rail—if the development is concentrated in places along the corridor at densities that support rapid transit.

ONE STRATEGY, MANY VARIABLES

Consideration of the relationships among the real-estate market, highway and transit planning and development regulation, leads to the strategy of greater concentration of the commercial development that generates the most traffic at important intersections along a highway corridor, with the amount of land set aside for these uses based on a realistic estimate of market forces. In between areas of commercial concentration, the highway function of the corridor should dominate over access to fronting land uses. Service roads or parallel roads should be used for access in these areas; the zoning should call for land uses that do not require immediate access from a highway. Applying this strategy requires different actions in different sets of circumstances.

Expectations for commercial development, but not supported by zoning or official plan. Most properties fronting along Highway 111 in Indian Wells, California, for example, had remained undeveloped in expectation of commercial projects in the future, but Interstate 10 had taken much of the traffic off the highway, and the market for such development did not appear to be present. In the mid-1980s, Indian Wells adopted a specific plan that zoned these frontages for resort or multi-family, with a substantial required landscaped set-back. Commercial frontages were confined to either end of the corridor, next to commercial development in neighboring communities. The city has successfully defended 11 separate law suits and the plan is now substantially implemented.

Commercial corridor policy in place, but only a few developments. Many metropolitan regions are expanding so rapidly that there are still highway corridors in outlying areas where commercial development is officially expected, but has not yet taken place. There may be strips along the corridor that are already zoned commercial, and a policy map may exist that shows strip commercial development in areas not yet zoned for it. In this situation, where most of the development is potential, local government has the most flexibility to locate zones of intense commercial development, the size and number to be determined based as much as possible on real-estate market studies, and the locations on points of greatest access. Other locations along the corridor can continue to have commercial zoning or light-industrial zoning, but in districts that do not contain uses that are high traffic generators. Multi-family housing may be an appropriate alternative to the commercial zoning.

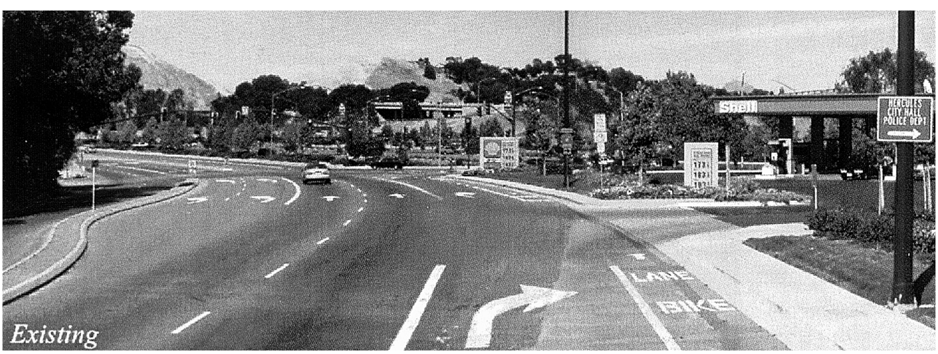
An example of this situation is the Pine Island corridor in Cape Coral, Florida, where the master plan proposes organizing development as suggested above. In Brookfield, Wisconsin, a suburb of Milwaukee, the city has anticipated commercial development along

Capitol Drive, and has adopted a policy of placing development only at major intersections. Wildwood, a community in St. Louis County, is clearly in the path of commercial-corridor development. Old Manchester Road, running west from St. Louis through next-door Ellisville, is already a complete commercial strip. Wildwood, instead of enacting strip-commercial zoning, has adopted a master plan that makes an area along the Old Manchester Road in the center of the community a mixed-use town center for stores, offices, and a higher density of residential development than is permitted elsewhere in the community. The street plan is laid out to create a park-once district that will also ultimately be sufficiently dense to support rapid transit. Again, the development is concentrated in one area, not grouped equally around the four sides of an intersection.

Zoned, partially developed. Many arterial roads are zoned for commercial development, but development has taken place only at some locations, while others remain rural or residential. Again, an evaluation should be made of the market potential for the whole corridor. The best outcome is like those discussed above, where development is concentrated in the most accessible locations, and the areas in-between have lower-intensity commercial development, or are zoned for another use such as multi-family housing. The difficulty is changing the zoning map, although the community has the power to do so in accordance with a comprehensive plan.

Mapped, and developed, stable, or deteriorating. In many places commercial corridors have been mapped in places that do not have the market potential to fill all the land with successful businesses. The result is a familiar mix: some small office buildings, franchise restaurants, automobile repair, failing strip malls, old motels. Given the competition from

Figure I Existing typical commercially zoned highway strip in Hercules, California.



other kinds of retailing, the future of these areas is in some kind of redevelopment. Along the Mayport Road corridor in Jacksonville and Atlantic Beach, Florida, for example, redevelopment is anticipated as a new highway connection at the north end of the strip makes the area more accessible. The city is adopting standards, prepared by Landers, Atkins, to improve individual properties as they redevelop. Standards include bringing buildings out to the street with parking behind, improved landscaping, connections between developments, co-ordinated parking, and storm-water detention.

Something like this transformation has already happened at Mashpee Commons, situated near a traffic circle on Cape Cod. A redevelopment of a conventional strip shopping center, Mashpee Commons is ultimately planned to be the town center for a residential development, although it will continue to draw customers from a much larger trading area. The shopping has been rebuilt as street-front retail, but much of the parking is still in perimeter lots. A related example is the town center for the Kentlands/Lakelands development in Gaithersburg, Maryland. Located on a main road where it can draw customers from a larger trading area, the area's retail streets are well integrated into the surrounding residential development.

Mapped, developed, maybe too successful. In Brookfield, Wisconsin, Blue Mound Road is lined with development that is approaching downtown intensity, with a regional mall, smaller malls, substantial office parks, and hotels all within about a mile of highway frontage. Brookfield is closer to the center of the metropolitan region than Milwaukee, so Blue Mound Road, originally a country lane, is a main street for a substantial section of the region. The combination of intense use and heavy traffic leads to serious traffic problems and is having a negative impact on development plans. The master plan for Brookfield suggests alleviating traffic congestion on the most intensely developed segment of Blue Mound Road by creating two parallel local streets. This is a different strategy from the more commonly used service road, as the secondary road is a block away from the highway. Instead of simply widening the corridor, these parallel streets create a street grid, as in a conventional downtown, so that left turns do not need to be made from mid-block locations along the highway. Instead, traffic crosses the highway at signaled intersections, and then makes the necessary turn.

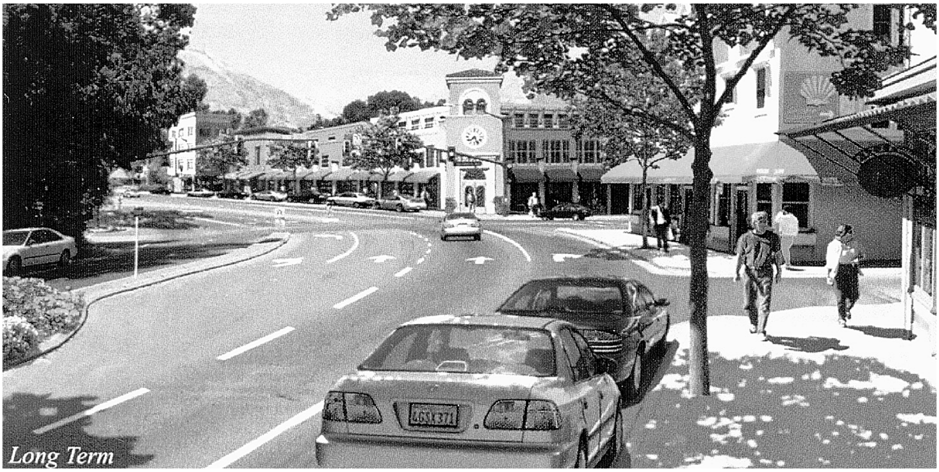
This proposal to separate through-traffic on Blue Mound from local traffic that could use the new streets was met with strong opposition by homeowners whose backyards bordered the proposed parallel street south of Blue Mound Road. They organized almost the entire neighborhood to protest. The future success of commercial development on Blue Mound Road is vital to the whole community, as the taxes from this development keep residential property taxes relatively low; commercial property tax revenues from businesses along Blue Mound Road also help support one of the most successful school districts in the region. Even the opponents of the new streets agree that the streets would make commercial development more viable and would help preserve the economic health of the commercial district in the future. The community faces a tough political choice.

It is in corridors such as Blue Mound Road, where some development has reached almost urban intensity, that rapid transit in the suburbs has the best chance of succeeding. Rapid-transit stops also help give structure to a commercial corridor, encouraging more concentrated development near stations.

ARLINGTON COUNTY

When the Washington, D.C. metropolitan transit system (the Metro) was being planned in the 1960s, Arlington County, Virginia, recognized the potential for the transit system to support new development. Plans for one of the transit lines called for it to run through Arlington, down the center of Route 66. The stations would be islands in the middle of the highway, which would have little influence on development in the areas immediately surrounding the stations. The county put together the additional financing to have the Metro built in a tunnel that runs parallel to the highway about half a mile to the south, more or less along the route of Wilson Boulevard, a traditional commercial corridor. The tunnel rejoins the highway about halfway across Arlington County and the line continues in the center of Route 66 out into Fairfax County. There are five stops in Arlington County: Rosslyn, Court House, Clarendon, Virginia Square, and Ballston. Although this corridor has been identified by Joel Garreau as an edge city, it is very different from the automobile-based development pattern in most such suburban locations. Wilson Boulevard, with the adjacent Clarendon Boulevard, forms a one-way pair and continues to be a major traffic corridor. This area has been given a completely new structure by the presence of the Metro stations, particularly at Rosslyn and Ballston, at either end of the corridor, which have become very like traditional downtowns. Pentagon City and Crystal City, also in Arlington County but on a different branch of the

Figure 2 Long term planning for the highway strip in Hercules, California (shown in Figure 1), by Dover, Kohl and Partners. Reprinted from *Redesigning Cities: Principles, Practice, Implementation* by Jonathan Barnett.



Metro, have also developed as concentrated urban districts. The Arlington County examples show what could happen in the next generation if rapid-transit systems are added to commercial corridors that already have a high intensity of development.

Most places have too much land zoned commercial along arterial highways, and not enough commercial land in any one place to permit the development of the compact, park-once retail centers that the market is now demanding. Communities that are prepared to concentrate commercial development at the most important intersections along a highway corridor, and remap the land in between for other uses, can promote higher-quality retail investment and should see less traffic congestion as well.