

## Chapter 12. COMMUNITY DESIGN

**Community Design Vision:** *To encourage the development of neighborhoods of innovative and superior design to preserve and enhance the character and community of Sussex County.*

### 12.1 OVERVIEW

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At one time, Sussex County consisted mainly of small towns surrounded by rural countryside. The towns were characterized by compact neighborhoods, small-town “Main Street” business areas, and a mix of traditional architectural styles. The rural areas featured working family farms, crossroads villages and extensive woodlands, all connected by country roads.

Sussex County is still an attractive place, with many towns having elements of their traditional character and style. Much of the rural countryside remains picturesque farmland. Many new developments have included well-designed open spaces and carefully designed buildings and amenities. However, crowded highways, strip commercial development, cookie cutter subdivisions, nondescript construction, and other aspects of suburban sprawl now exist in some areas. In certain areas of the County’s eastern sector and along some higher volume state roads, there is little physical distinction between the town and the country.

The key is to design modern land uses in a manner that adds to the character of the community, instead of intruding into it. Some of these changes have expanded economic opportunities, brought commercial services, provided new housing opportunities and created convenient road connections. Yet, too often new construction has occurred with little thought towards design, causing parts of Sussex County to have the same overly standardized appearance as many other parts of the country.

This Plan recognizes that change is inevitable. At the same time, the County is looking for the best ways to direct the location, appearance and function of new development. This chapter discusses how to use zoning, subdivision regulations and other means to produce development that is based on rational site planning, and forward-thinking design. Many of the techniques discussed illustrate how to incorporate open space and traditional design elements into new settings, an attempt to draw from the best of the old and the best of the new.

It also is important to maintain an attractive environment for economic development reasons. Visitors and new residents come to Sussex County for an attractive setting, where they can enjoy waterways, beaches and other natural areas. If Sussex County becomes unattractive, with garish signs, excessive numbers of billboards, destruction of natural features, and monotonous construction, it will harm economic growth.

The purpose of this plan element is to support and encourage development concepts that promote a variety of design concepts and styles. While the County recognizes that development is market-driven and that each site and each development proposal is unique, it encourages concepts that protect the rural character of the County, protect a site’s environmental assets, and take into

account the character of surrounding development. This chapter does not seek to regulate new construction or design, but rather serve as a guide for developers and their designers to consider in the future planning and development of land.

## 12.2 PROMOTING BETTER COMMUNITY DESIGN

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Sussex County Code contains regulations for the subdivision of land and zoning. Through the code, Sussex County currently uses two primary methods to encourage better community design: Residential Planned Communities and Cluster Development. Master planning, or small area planning, provides an additional tool for Sussex County to encourage better, more cohesive, community design in specific areas.

### 12.2.1 Residential Planned Communities

The purpose of the Residential Planned Community (RPC) District is to encourage large-scale developments as a means of creating a superior living environment through unified developments, providing for the application of design ingenuity while protecting existing and future developments, and achieving the goals of the Comprehensive Plan. By integrating many elements of design, this district encourages off-street parking, ensures the appropriate relationship between uses, intensity, and height within and outside of the RPC, and allows the Planning and Zoning Commission to impose conditions regarding layout and design.

An applicant may ask the County to add this option to their property as an option to the regular zoning provisions. RPC provisions:

- Usually allow a mix of housing types, including single-family homes, townhouses and apartments.
- Provide for a slightly higher density than the density that is possible without use of the RPC provisions, in order to provide an incentive.
- Allow a percentage of the tract (such as up to 15 percent) to be developed in neighborhood-oriented commercial uses that are highly compatible with homes.
- Give the County the authority to modify zoning requirements, such as setbacks, within a RPC development.

### 12.2.2 Cluster Development

Another method that Sussex County employs to encourage better community design is the cluster development option. Cluster development or “open space development” involves providing incentives for the permanent preservation of a percentage of the land within a new development by allowing deviation in lot size, type of dwelling, lot coverage and open space from that which is normally required by a residential zoning district. Cluster development also permits the developer to reduce road lengths, amounts of grading and lengths of utility lines - each of which saves on construction and maintenance costs.

In a cluster development, the “open” or conserved land is typically owned and maintained by a homeowner association, although other methods of ownership are possible. The homes are allowed to be placed on smaller lots than would normally be required, or different types of housing are allowed to offset the land used as open space. The County offers greater flexibility in lot sizes and dimensions in return for the open space. The open space is permanently preserved by a conservation easement that prevents future subdivision or building on the open space.

In comparison, conventional subdivisions usually result in little or no preserved open space (except wetlands and stormwater management areas) because the balance of the entire tract is subdivided into building lots. Often, most of the building lots in a conventional subdivision are virtually the same size and shape—hence the nickname “Cookie Cutter Subdivisions.”

The cluster option has been very widely used in Sussex County in recent years. It is available in the AR-1 zoning district, which covers most of the undeveloped land areas in the County. The cluster option has also made it more economical to develop central water and sewage systems in rural locations.

It requires cluster developments that provide for a total environment and design which are considered superior to that which would be allowed under the regulations for the standard option subdivision. Criteria for “superior design” are contained in the Sussex County Code and include information ranging from the clustering of homes during site design site to the design of open space.

### 12.2.3 Master Planning and Small Area Plans

The County would like to encourage more master planning of large-scale developments on large parcels or groups of smaller parcels in order to provide flexibility in the design of a site’s buildings, trails and pedestrian paths, roads, and open space as well as encourage interconnectivity between parcels of land. With County involvement in large scale master plans, there is opportunity to plan for a larger area and create automobile, bike and pedestrian connections between developments.

Development of small area plans provides Sussex County with the opportunity to develop long-range plans – just like a comprehensive plan – but applied to smaller, more specific areas of the County. A small area plan is an aspirational community plan that addresses an area’s unique characteristics and then develops a vision for the future, as property ownership and other conditions change over time. It enables the County to prioritize and coordinate capital projects and to set the stage for ensuing private investment. With goals to enhance quality of life, small area plans address elements of the built environment - housing, businesses, parks/open space, public improvements, and the transportation network that connects them.

### 12.2.4 Other Design Standards

Recently, Sussex County Council determined that the County's Street Design Standards were outdated and needed updating. In addition, the Council wanted to ensure that the street design standards contained in the County Code contain flexibility to enable creativity in design (taking into account existing topographical and environmental features) while providing safe communities for County residents. On March 28, 2017, Sussex County Council passed a drainage and grading ordinance. The ordinance includes new street design requirements related to driveways, on-street parking, sidewalks, and cul-de-sacs, among others.

## 12.3 DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT CHARACTERISTICS

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The County recognizes that development in the County is market-driven and often the design of new development reflects the desires of the current market. However, creative approaches can be considered in new development. The County does not regulate the incorporation of design standards but encourages that the following design standards be considered when designing new development:

### 12.3.1 Trees

The planting of street trees can improve aesthetics and eventually provide a canopy of shade over streets. Studies show that mature street trees can also increase the value of homes up to 10 percent. If it is not appropriate to have shade trees in the right-of-way, they can also be planted immediately outside of the right-of-way.

The County would like to consider the creation of an ordinance designed to protect established, mature, healthy trees during the construction of new developments to better preserve existing trees and green space.

### 12.3.2 Lighting

New street lights could be similar in design to older styles of street lights. In addition, downward screening of outdoor lights on residential and commercial properties should be provided whenever feasible to prevent intrusion into adjoining residential areas.

### 12.3.3 Sidewalks

Sidewalks (or asphalt paths along main roads in rural areas) are an important element in residential neighborhoods that increase safety and connectivity for pedestrians and can provide them with an ability to walk or bicycle to stores, schools and parks. Also, overly wide residential streets and intersections should be avoided when possible to discourage speeding and to make it easier for pedestrians to cross the street.

### 12.3.4 Parking Location

Whenever practical, parking should be located to the rear or side of buildings, so that the front yard can be landscaped. When parking and garages are placed to the rear of lots, with access

using alleys, this design avoids conflicts between sidewalks and vehicles backing into the street, and allows the entire curbside to be available for on-street parking.

If rear access to garages is not practical, then garages should enter onto the side of homes whenever possible, particularly on corner lots. If a front-entrance garage is proposed, it should be designed so that it is not an overly prominent part of the street. For example, a one lane driveway can pass along the side of a house and then widen to enter a two-car garage that is setback from the front of the house. "Snout" houses should be avoided that have a front entrance garage as the home's most prominent feature.

### **12.3.5 Building Orientation**

Buildings can be placed relatively close to the street, with front or side porches, to encourage interaction among neighbors. On a corner lot, a side porch can have the same effect. If residents spend time on their front porch, they can help oversee the neighborhood and report suspicious activity to the police.

Additionally, the use of flag lots should be avoided whenever possible. A "flag lot" is a lot that has a narrow land area connecting the main part of the lot to a road. The narrow stretch includes the driveway. As such, the building is set back far from the street. Flag lots should be controlled so they are not overly used; however, one or two flag lots within a development can be beneficial at the end of a road to allow a greatly reduced length of road.

### **12.3.6 Building Height**

Building height is regulated in County Code, which includes maximum height requirements for each zoning district. However, since this is a maximum permitted height, not all neighboring properties or developments may have built to that maximum. When practical, building heights of new development should be compatible with the scale and character of existing neighborhoods and surrounding developments.

### **12.3.7 Maximum Building Setbacks and Limits on Front Yard Parking**

In key older areas of the County, it may be appropriate to specifically establish a maximum building setback. The goal is to have new construction be consistent with prevailing setbacks along a block of older buildings. The code can also limit new parking in the front yard in older areas. The goal is to encourage front yard setbacks that are relatively small, but well landscaped.

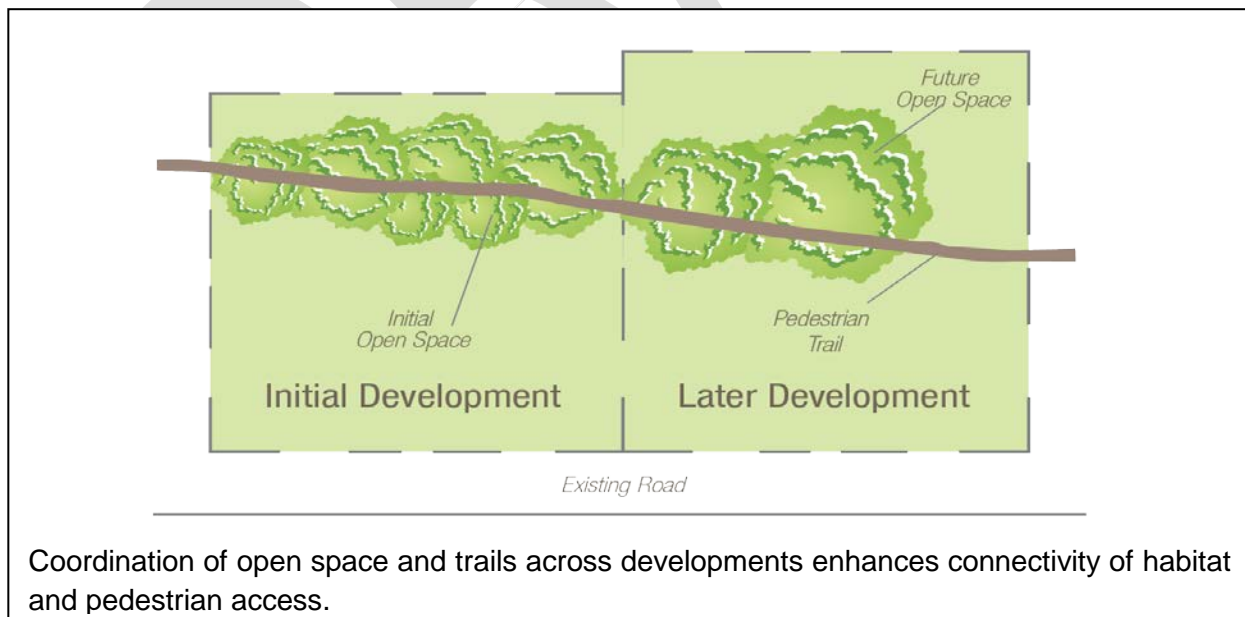


### 12.3.8 Architectural Elements

The use of architectural details, pitched roofs, and varied rooflines can add visual interest, even for chain stores. While the County does not regulate architectural elements of the design of a development's buildings and facilities, the County is open to the use of unique architectural elements in design and is considering creation of an awards program to recognize outstanding design of both buildings and sites.

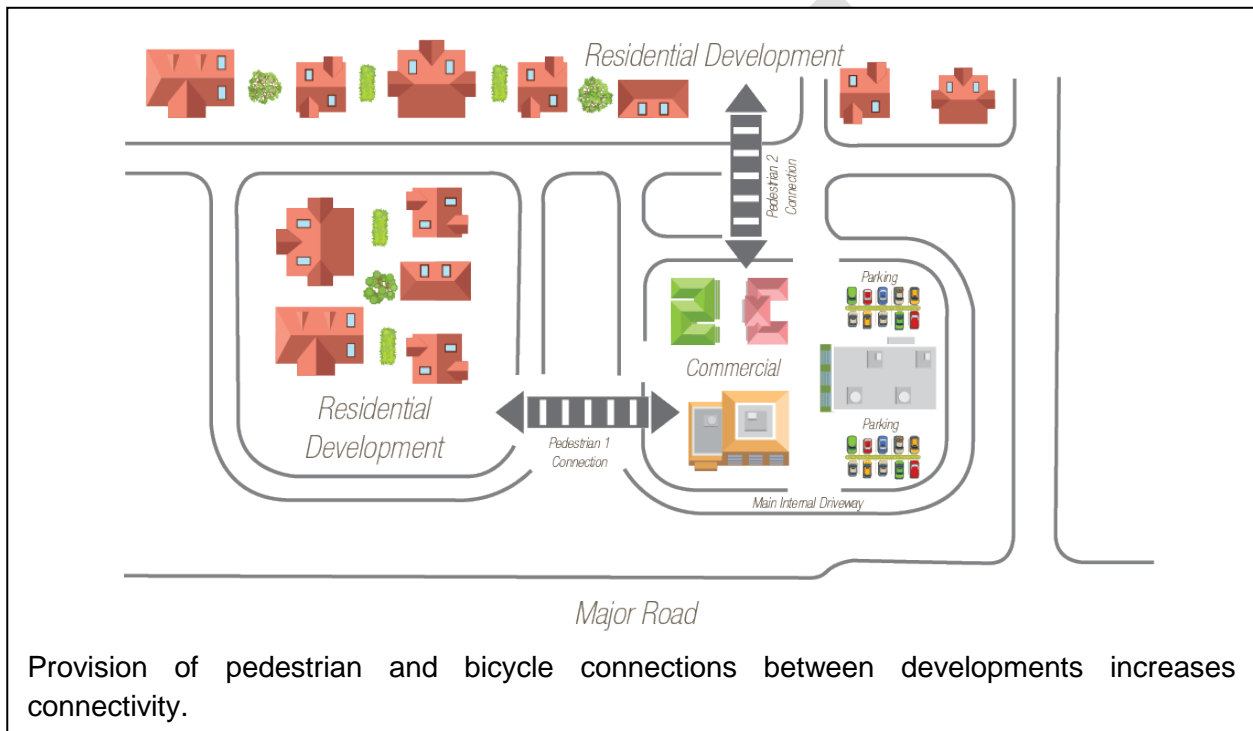
### 12.3.9 Open Space and Trail Connectivity

The coordination of open spaces and trails across various developments can provide benefits to both wildlife habitat as well as pedestrian connectivity. When considering open space and trail locations in a current proposed development, future linkages on adjacent future development tracts should be considered.



### 12.3.10 Pedestrian and Bicycle Connectivity

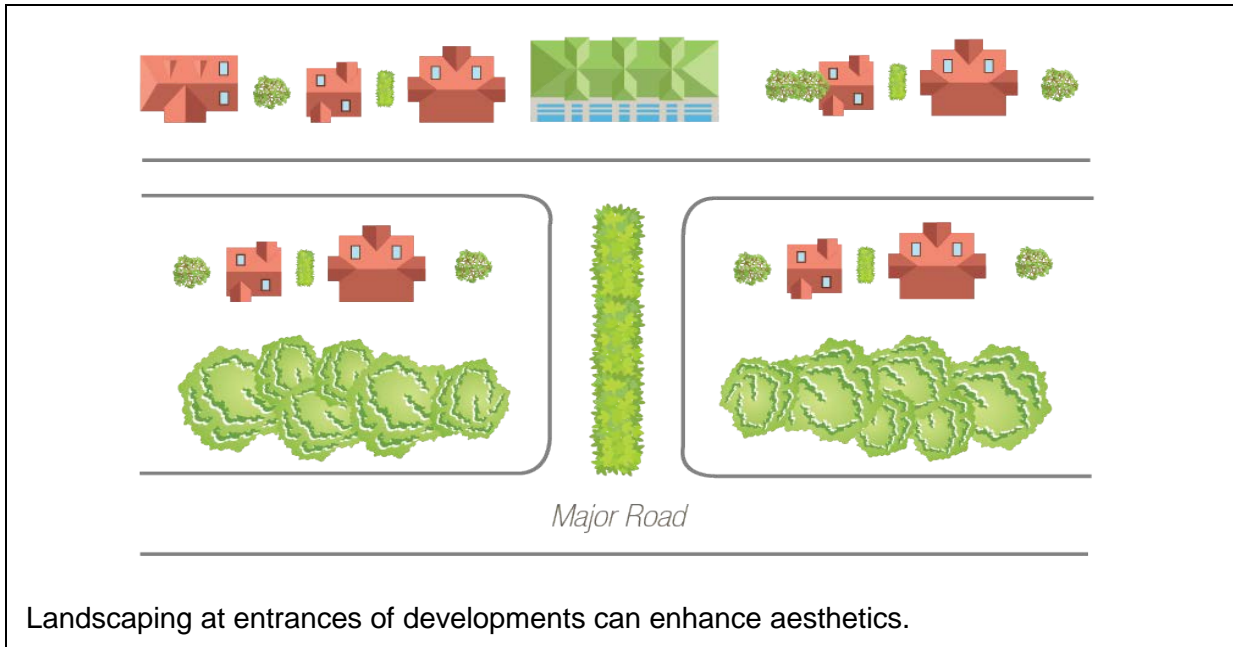
The provision of pedestrian and bicycle connections between various developments can encourage walking and cycling and increase access to community facilities such as parks, schools, and libraries. Where a road does not provide a connection, a hard-surfaced pedestrian easement could be provided. Additionally, in larger commercial developments interconnectivity should be integrated into site design and most vehicle traffic should be directed to routes that do not conflict with the main pedestrian entrances from parking lots.



Sussex County would like to revisit County Code to determine if modifications are needed to encourage interconnectivity between residential developments as well as develop connectivity standards for new developments in order to create multiple, alternate routes for automobiles and more route options for people on foot and on bicycles.

### 12.3.11 Landscaped Entrances

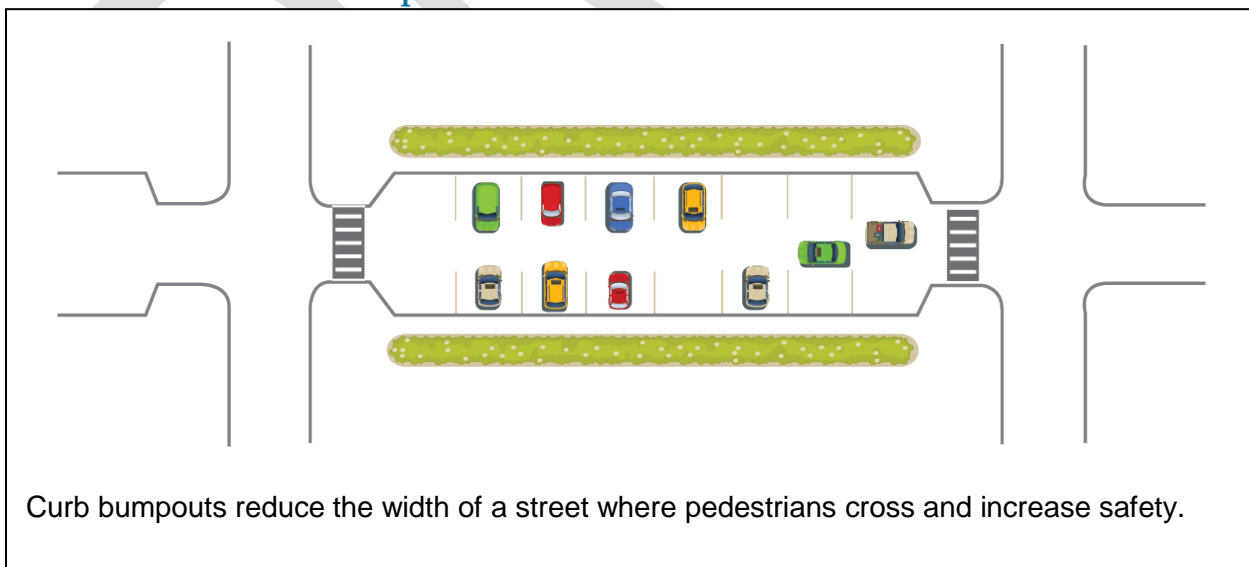
Creation of well landscaped boulevard-style entrances can provide a great first impression. Along major roads, reverse frontage lots should be used when feasible to minimize the number of driveways entering onto major roads. When rear yards face onto a major road, they should be separated by landscaping, with any fencing on the inside of the landscaping. Open space should be provided along major roads to maintain some of the rural character and to reduce noise conflicts between homes and traffic.



### 12.3.12 Curb Bumpouts

On residential streets and some streets in commercial areas, there may be a possibility for curbs to be extended outward at intersections so there is less width of street that needs to be crossed by pedestrians. The street can then be widened where on-street parking spaces are provided. By reducing the street width where there is not a need for parking, it also reduces the amount of pavement and runoff and reduces construction and maintenance costs.

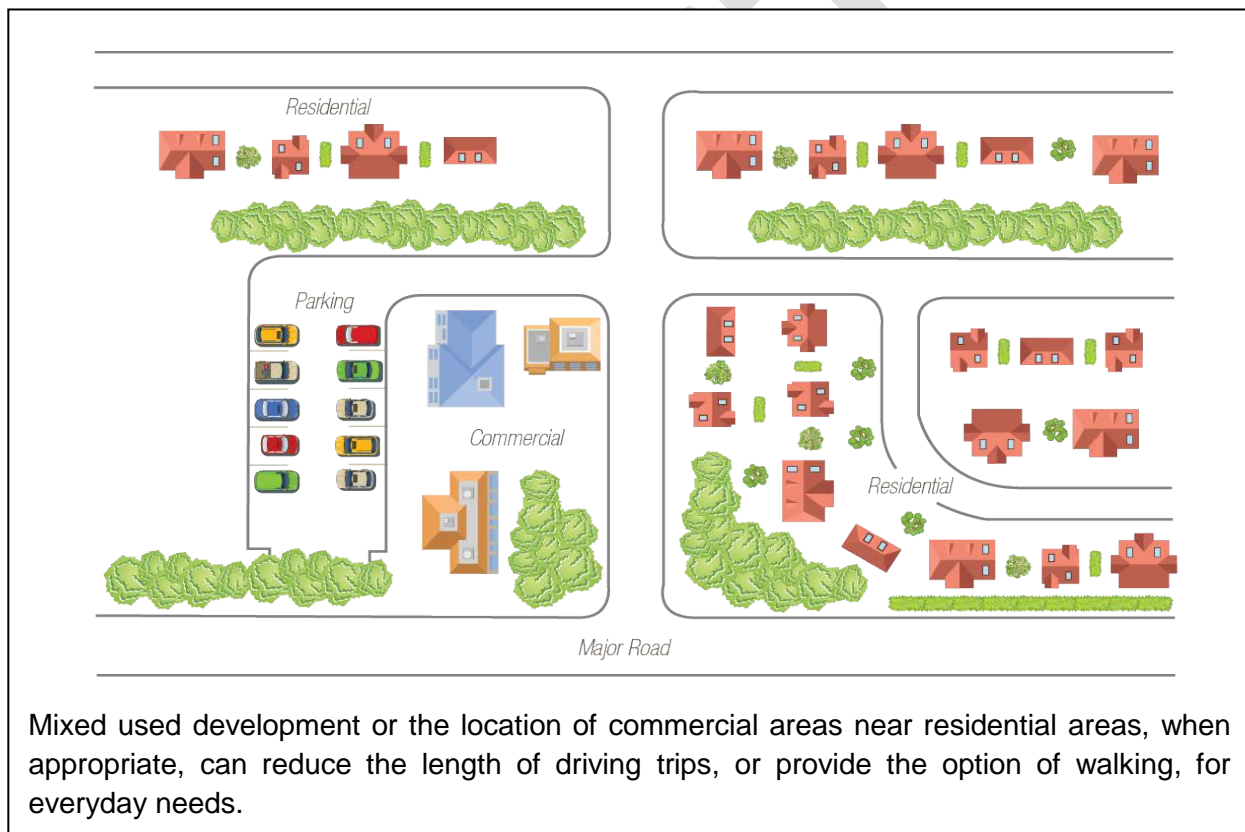
### 12.3.13 Commercial Development Location





In larger residential developments, an area of neighborhood-oriented stores and services can be desirable to serve local needs. Mixed-use development or well-distributed commercial areas throughout the County can also reduce the lengths of driving trips, or provide the option of walking, for everyday needs. Because retail and neighborhood services require a large enough population to be viable, multiple RPCs can be designed to provide pedestrian and vehicular network access to the same commercial area, rather than providing retail in each large development.

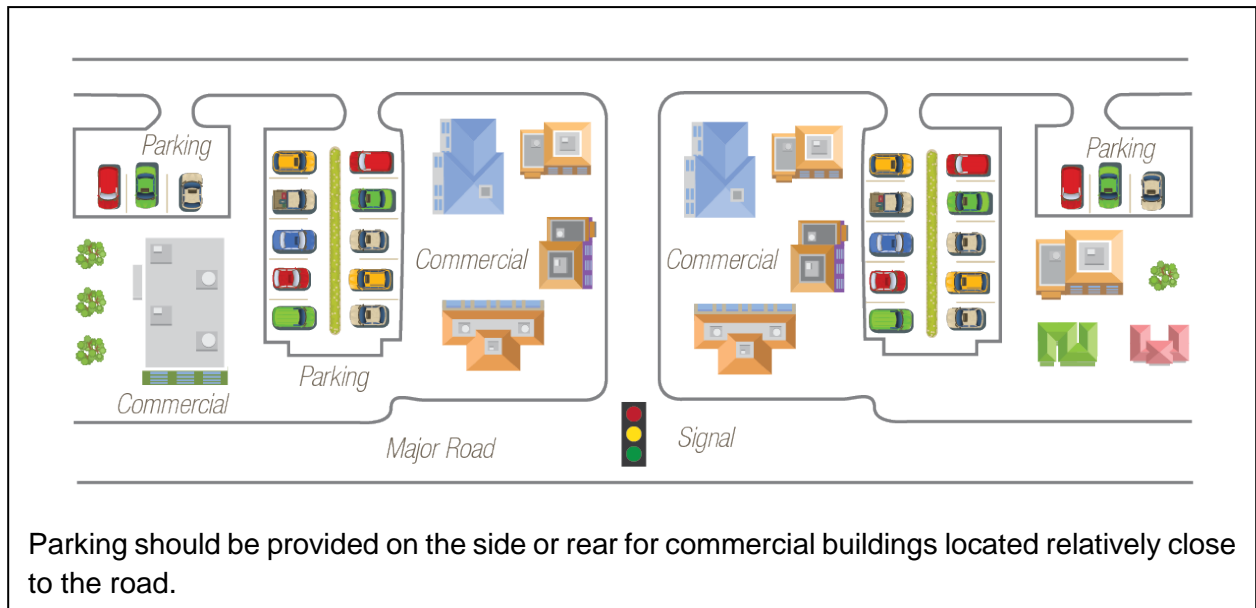
The County does not currently have a mixed-use zoning district; however, code should be revisited to determine if a mixed use district is feasible and appropriate in the County. Likewise, the RPC districts should be expanded for use in commercially-zoned areas where residential uses are permitted.



### 12.3.14 Commercial Development Design

Commercial buildings should be encouraged to be placed relatively close to the road, provided they still allow proper sight distance and room for future road widening. Most vehicle parking

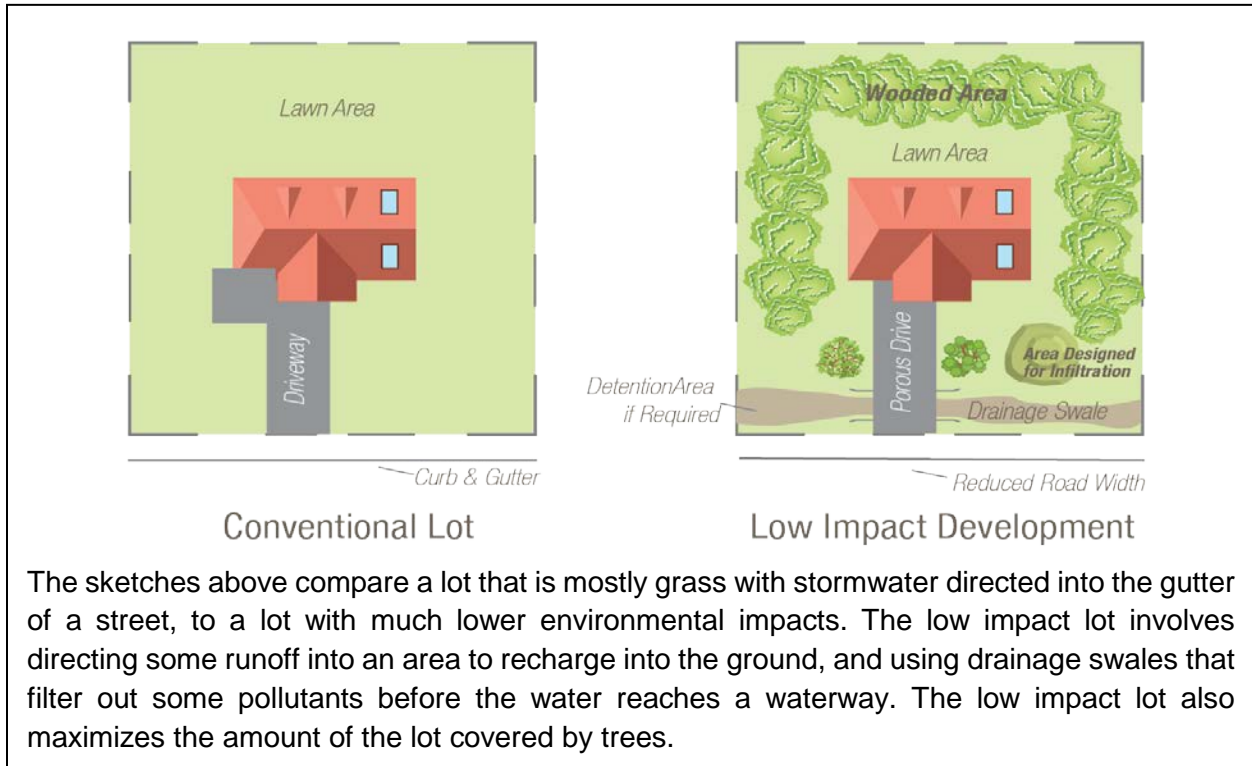
should be placed to the rear or side of buildings when possible. At best, a new street or alley or interconnected parking aisles should be provided parallel to the major road so that most traffic can access the main road at a traffic signal. The commercial area should also be well-buffered from nearby homes by landscaping.



### 12.3.15 Preserved Open Space within New Developments

Preserved open space can often increase values of adjacent homes. Open space development can also help retain more naturalistic stormwater patterns, which promotes groundwater recharge and protects water quality. This is because stormwater swales can be wider and vegetated, as opposed to having stormwater piped or constrained within narrow channels to avoid losing density.

As described above, the RPC provisions in the County's Zoning Ordinance allow flexibility in the standards for larger developments, in return for a higher quality of site design. However, there currently is no minimum open space requirement for these developments. Greater attention is needed to the design of the open space to make sure it serves a valuable public purpose and is inter-connected. The amount of open space can vary with the allowed density, based upon the underlying zoning district. The preserved open space should be used to help to maintain the scenic character of the County by preserving landscaped open areas along major roads and to maintain forested buffers between developments.



In addition, the County offers greater flexibility in lot sizes and dimensions in return for the open space in cluster subdivisions. In cluster development, the applicant should show that the development has been carefully located to protect important natural areas, including mature forests and waterways. Open spaces should be linked together whenever possible, as opposed to being small, fragmented or narrow areas. Land areas should not be allowed to be counted towards the required open space unless they serve the residents of a community. Stormwater ponds should only count as open space if they are designed to resemble a natural pond or are suitable for a recreational purpose. Careful attention should also be focused upon what types of water and sewage facilities should be allowed to count as open space. Generally, spray irrigation fields and well sites should be able to count as open space, but other treatment facilities should not. Also, golf courses can be suitable for open space, as long as there also is a recreation area that is available for use by all residents.

Trees should be planted in open space areas where appropriate. Landscape tree specimens should be planted in active open space areas where appropriate, particularly around playgrounds.

It may be desirable to allow a reduction in the amount of active open space if the developer provides substantial recreation facilities. However, if a pool, recreation center, or community

center are built, significant forethought must be put into determining how these facilities will be operated, maintained, and funded.

Several alternatives exist for long term maintenance of the preserved open space, including ownership by a legally-binding homeowners association, the County, or a land trust. The areas needing the least maintenance would be areas preserved in forests or wetlands. In some cases, the open space could remain in one large agricultural use or a horse farm, with pedestrian trails around the edge of the farm for use by the residents.

Wherever feasible, open space should be provided in locations that can connect to existing public or semi-public open spaces or preserve land along a waterway. Required open spaces should be required to include pedestrian trails that are accessible by the residents, and preferably by the public. As discussed above, the trails should connect to other neighborhoods, nearby commercial areas, and public lands. Master planning of large parcels of land provides the high-level view and opportunity to incorporate the design and location of new trail connections and extensions of existing trails into new development plans.

In order to promote better access to and less fragmentation of open space, Sussex County would like to revisit County Code to determine if modifications are needed to open space requirements or if incentives can be developed.

#### **12.3.16 Buffering and Landscaping**

Forested buffers should continue to be provided within and around new residential developments, and include the preservation existing trees and other natural vegetation where possible. Additionally, in developed areas, a high impervious coverage can still be attractive with proper landscaping. In these areas, street trees and shade in parking lots should be encouraged. Buffering is also particularly important between new businesses and residential neighborhoods. A buffer yard in some cases can be strengthened with a berm. To minimize the amount of land that is consumed by a berm, a retaining wall could be used on the business side of the berm. The County should also encourage fencing when needed on the business side of buffer yard landscaping.

#### **12.3.17 Water Features**

Wetlands, as defined under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act, and uplands along waterways should be preserved as passive open space whenever possible. Existing native vegetation should be retained and additional native plantings should be considered in areas where natural vegetation is sparse. To the extent possible, trails should be constructed on upland areas. If a wetland must be crossed, the wetland crossing should be the shortest distance possible and the walkway should be elevated. In tidal wetlands, the boardwalk should be elevated to allow vegetation to grow under the boardwalk.

#### **12.3.18 Utilities**

The wires, poles, and other equipment associated with overhead power and communications utilities can obscure views and scenery. If feasible, overhead utilities should be located underground.

### 12.3.19 Redevelopment

While the majority of development that occurs in the County is new development, redevelopment of existing sites may become increasingly important in the long-term future of the County. Redevelopment can rehabilitate and add to the housing stock, improve economic conditions, and breathe new life into an area that may be deteriorating. Redevelopment should be encouraged whenever possible.

### 12.3.20 Green Site Design

Green site design involves incorporation of methods into design and construction that minimize impact on the environment. Green site design can involve the use of solar energy, which may simply involve “passive” solar heating by maximizing the use of natural sunlight for internal lighting. An emphasis is placed upon minimizing the amount of fossil fuels that must be used for heating, air conditioning and ventilation. A simple principle is to locate buildings to maximize southern exposure to the sun. This involves placing large number of windows on the south side of a building, to allow natural heating and lighting. Deciduous trees should then be planted along the south side of the building, to avoid excessive heat during the summer, while allowing the sun through in the winter. Evergreen trees should be planted on the north and west sides of a building to block winter winds and provide shade. If buildings in a development are constructed to use solar energy, there should be deed restrictions to avoid future obstructions on adjacent lots.

Green site design can also seek to promote recharge of stormwater into the ground. This can be accomplished through rain gardens (which are landscaped depressions on a site), infiltration trenches (which are filled with stones above a geotextile), long and wide vegetated swales, and other methods. When stormwater is directed to long, relatively flat swales or vegetated filter strips, it not only promotes recharge, but also filters out eroded soil and certain other pollutants before they reach waterways.

To minimize environmental impact, there should be efforts to minimize the total land areas that are covered by surfaces that are “impervious” to water. This may involve clustering homes on portions of a site, which reduces the amount of pavement per home. Excessive widths of streets should also be avoided. Green site design also promotes use of pervious pavement. This can involve porous concrete or pervious asphalt. In both cases, some runoff can pass through the pavement. A stone base is used and then a geotextile to filter the runoff underground. Pervious pavement is particularly useful in portions of parking areas that are not used on a daily basis and in pedestrian areas. Less used parking areas can also be constructed with grass that is grown within a grid material.



An example of a green roof.

Whenever practical, the turnaround of a cul-de-sac street should include a landscaped island. This island improves the appearance and reduces runoff.

Natural drainage flow paths should be maintained. Drainage from rooftops should be directed into vegetated areas on each lot, as opposed to be directed to large stormwater systems. Plantings of many open space areas should be encouraged to result in their eventual re-forestation.

Stormwater ponds ideally would be designed to hold water for several hours or more to allow pollutants to separate from runoff. However, if the ponds retain water for more than 24 hours, aeration is desirable to avoid breeding of mosquitos.

### 12.3.21 Signs

The sizes and heights of signs should be controlled to maintain the attractiveness of the County. In October of 2016, Sussex County Council passed a new sign ordinance to reflect current trends in the sign industry and sign technology. In addition, Sussex County has seen an increase in the use of billboards and digital/electronic signs, including those with animation.

The County recognizes that billboards should be limited in their sizes, their locations, and the minimum distances between billboards. In addition, electronically changing signs should be limited in how often they can change to avoid distractions to motorists.

Among the new regulations that pertain to billboards, the updated sign ordinance increased the separation distance between billboards; increased the front-yard setbacks for billboards; specified a separation distance between billboards and on-premises signs; and specified limits of billboard height and area based on whether the billboard is located on a four lane highway or two-lane road. In addition, the new ordinance contains regulations for animation and message timing for digital/electronic signs.



An example of a tiny house.

### 12.3.22 Home Construction and Design Trends

A number of trends and movements in home construction have arisen across the country, some of which may find their way to Sussex County over the next decade. One of these is the tiny house movement, which is a social movement where people are choosing to downsize and simplify the space where they live. Tiny houses can range in size from 100 to 400 square feet and come in many shapes, sizes, and forms. Another is the construction of agrihoods which are master planned or residential communities built with a working farm as a focus (ULI, 2015). Sussex County encourages innovative building and site design provided it is compatible with surrounding land use and development.

## 12.4 . COMMUNITY DESIGN GOALS, OBJECTIVES, AND STRATEGIES

Below is a list of goals, objectives, and strategies for Sussex County's Community Design Element:

### Goal 12.1: Promote design that is compatible with its surroundings.

**Objective 12.1.1** Consider whether the design of new development fits the character of existing neighborhoods.

**Strategy 12.1.1.1** Consider design standards for lighting such as downward screening for commercial and residential properties.

**Strategy 12.1.1.2** Revisit height limits in the code for residential and commercial districts to determine if heights are accurate for such districts and uses, as well as determining if the method for measuring height should be revised.

**Objective 12.1.2** Promote site design that minimizes adverse impacts.

**Strategy 12.1.2.1** Encourage the locating of overhead power and communications utilities underground.

**Strategy 12.1.2.2** Lead by example by exceeding standards in the construction of County public facilities, including parking lots, public buildings, landscaped areas, and related projects.

**Objective 12.1.3** Incorporate usable open space in new developments.

**Strategy 12.1.3.1** Revisit County Code to determine if modifications are needed to open space requirements to promote better access to and less fragmentation of open space.

**Strategy 12.1.3.2** Consider creating an ordinance designed to protect established, mature, healthy trees during the construction of new developments to better preserve existing trees and green spaces.

**Objective 12.1.4** Encourage development design that promotes increased access between developments and community facilities including parks, schools, and libraries.

**Strategy 12.1.4.1** Encourage pedestrian connectivity between developments with sidewalks, paths, trails, and easements.

**Strategy 12.1.4.2** Revisit County Code to determine if modifications are needed to encourage interconnectivity between residential developments.

**Strategy 12.1.4.3** Develop connectivity standards for new developments in order to create multiple, alternate routes for automobiles and more route options for people on foot and on bicycles.

**Goal 12.2: Maintain the quality and character of new development.**

**Objective 12.2.1** Promote flexibility in design and character of new developments.

**Strategy 12.2.1.1** Revisit code to determine if modifications can be made to the review and approval process for new developments that in turn promote better design and character of the community.

**Objective 12.2.2** Continue to offer flexibility in standards for large developments in exchange for a higher design quality.

**Strategy 12.2.2.1** Continue to promote RPCs and cluster development options.

**Strategy 12.2.2.2** Consider ways to encourage master planning of large-scale developments that allow flexibility in the design of a site's buildings, trails and



pedestrian paths, roads, and open space and encourage interconnectivity between parcels of land.

**Objective 12.2.3** Encourage mixed-use where appropriate.

**Strategy 12.2.3.1** Revisit code to consider a mixed-use zoning district.

**Objective 12.2.4** Create opportunities for new types of housing when compatible with surrounding land use and development.

**Strategy 12.2.4.1** Review zoning code to determine if modifications are needed to permit new styles of housing such as tiny house and agrihood developments construction to be developed in the code as they appear.

**Objective 12.2.5** Consider agrihood-style development in Sussex County in order to foster local food production and connections to the traditional agricultural economy and lifestyle of the County.

**Strategy 12.2.5.1** Review zoning code to determine if modifications are needed to permit agrihood-style development where appropriate in the County.

**Objective 12.2.6** Revisit County Code to determine if modifications are needed to the Plan Submission Procedure.

**Strategy 12.2.6.1** Reinforce the Preliminary Conference as an integral step in the Plan Submission Procedure.

**Strategy 12.2.6.2** Consider strengthening the staff's recommendation and comment during the Plan Submission Procedure.

### **Goal 12.3: Improve the quality and character of existing development.**

**Objective 12.3.1** Encourage the revitalization of traditional areas of the County to create walkable and sustainable communities.

**Strategy 12.3.1.1** Determine if there are incentives that can be established for developers that propose redevelopment.