



# Implementing the Vision: Practical Steps to Transform Commercial Strips into Mixed Use Centers



**GrowSmart**  
M A I N E

## ELEMENTS OF THE “SWEET SPOT”

The “sweet spot” between the best practices of a center-oriented pattern of development and the needs of commercial owners and tenants:

- Site Design: the “Design” element of the four Ds
  - Density: homes/acre, jobs/acre or floor area ratio
  - Distance: between land uses and time/cost to travel between them
  - Diversity: mix of uses
  - Design: interconnections, streetscapes, distinct edges
- Land Use-Transportation Components:
  - Parking spaces as FAR as the eye can see.
- Market Realities:
  - Frontage and Visibility
  - Branding
  - Phasing

## THE MAKING OF AN ACTIVITY CENTER

“First Steps” strives to integrate land use and transportation design to shift the land use pattern from strip development toward a center-based pattern, creating an activity center.

The things that distinguish an activity center from a commercial strip are

- its intensity of activity,**
- the interactions of people,**
- the mix of activities,**
- the connections between activities,**
- and the bounding of the center.**



## Comparison of Land Use Metrics, Typical Small Downtown v. Typical Neighborhood or Community Strip Shopping Area

METRIC	Small Town Downtown	Small Town Downtown + Village	Commercial Strip
Land area	15 to 40 ac	25 to 150 ac	5-20 ac, arrayed along several hundred to several thousand feet of road frontage
Distance from center to edge	250 to 750 ft	0.25 to 0.5 mi	.25 to 1+ mi along frontage, with 500-1500 ft depth
Uses drawn to this type of center	Specialty retail (incl. specialty foods and urban grocers), variety of restaurants and entertainment, arts and cultural outlets, government buildings, parks, financial, legal & business services, professional offices, personal services, hotels and inns, mix of residential uses		Full-line grocery stores, department and big box stores, furniture, housewares, hardware and drug stores, branch banks, personal services, fast food & family restaurants, auto and related sales, multi-screen theaters, business and tourist lodgings, office/ business parks
<b>Mix of use (Diversity)</b>			
Commercial	65% - 90%	30% - 70%	90% - 100%
Residential	5% - 25%	20% - 60%	0% - 10%
Civic and Parkland	5% - 10%	10% - 15%	0%
<b>Intensity (Density)</b>			
Jobs/Ac	40 - 60	5 - 15	15 - 20 (in center itself)
Comm'l. Floor Area Ratio (FAR)*	0.6 - 1.0	---	0.1 - 0.2
Dwelling units/residential ac	Combined with commercial	2 - 8	---

\* FAR = total commercial floor area divided by buildable land area

Sources: Wilbur Smith Associates, *FACTS Arterial Land Use Policy*, in Destination Tomorrow, 2004; Surveys conducted by HNTB Corp. and E. Richert for *Gateway 1*, 2005 and *Gorham East-West Feasibility Study*, 2009



# Target Thresholds for a Re-Envisioned Strip

METRIC	Core	Core and Surrounding Area
Land area	15 to 25 acres	25 to 150 acres
Distance from center to edge	250 to 500 ft	0.25 to 0.5 mi
<b>Mix of use</b>		
<i>Commercial</i>	75% - 90%	60% - 85%
<i>Residential</i>	5% - 10%	5% - 25%
<i>Civic and Parkland</i>	5% - 10%	5% - 15%
<b>Intensity</b>		
<i>Jobs/Ac</i>	20 - 40	5 - 20
<i>Comm'l Floor Area Ratio (FAR) (total commercial floor area/buildable land area)</i>	0.4	0.4
<i>Dwelling units/residential acre</i>	4 - 8	2 - 4



# Topsham: Rural Emerging Strip

## Objectives

The objectives of the re-envisioned Route 196 and River Road site were to:

- Re-direct this emerging commercial strip toward a hamlet concept. (Note: as used here, a “hamlet” is a rural or semi-rural settlement that is smaller than a village but has some of the same residential, commercial and open space elements of a village, has an internal road system that serves the uses in the settlement, and is distinct enough to have an identity of its own.)
- Prepare a concept that would be feasible to implement from a property owner’s or investor’s point of view.
- Develop the concept in a manner consistent with local comprehensive planning and the State’s growth management principles.

Emerging Strip at Rt. 196 & River Rd., Topsham



**The best commercial opportunities for an emerging strip along a rural arterial liberty will be of two types:**

- Commercial retail and personal services that can draw upon the spending power of both passing traffic and suburbanites who have located in the commercial strip.
- Small scale light industry and offices of technologists, other late progressors, or consultants who can benefit from an elevated location but cannot afford more central locations, or who need room to spread out.

**The size of the planned area likely needs to be at least 50 - 75 acres, and preferably 100+ acres.**

- This may require working with multiple property owners who are interested in seeing the best development.
- There are strong arguments for cooperation that appeal to the self interests of the owners, the profitability of the whole is greater than the sum of the individual parts. Property owners often also want to provide a larger public good than might be able to be achieved on an individual parcel.

**The organization of the center can follow a hamlet model, with a mix of commercial, residential, resource based, and open space activities, in roughly the following proportions:**

	% of total 20-30 acres	% of total land
Commercial and Light Industrial	40-75%	10-20%
Residential	20-40%	40-50%
Resource Based Activity	Variable from a modest presence (e.g. recreational paths) to a large presence (e.g. farm land)	
Open Space (unsubsidized)	20-40%	Based in part to enable clustering of residential development

**A well traveled arterial road with high speeds, wide lanes and shoulders, and existing development along it will limit the creation of a traditional "hamlet" along the main road.**

- Aligned by creating a new "100% location" - a 4 corners at the intersection of a new road parallel to the arterial and a side road that provides the primary access from the arterial into the center of the property.
- This arrangement also (a) provides valuable new housing for commercial activity and (b) manages access along the arterial.

**Connect the planned area to adjacent areas at a few strategic points.**

**EXISTING CONDITIONS**



**An arterial can be either regarded as a barrier or boundary line.**

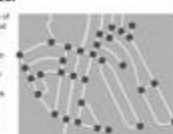
- The "hamlet" can be located primarily on one side of the road.
- Or it can be seen as a settlement of squares but related neighborhoods either side of the arterial that are inspired by the commercial activity along the arterial.

**Adopt a form that is flexible.**

- The best uses that ultimately choose to locate in the development are not entirely predictable. The form of the development, its layout, the relationships of non-residential and residential lots to each other - and related regulations should be able to accommodate different sets of uses.

**The interconnection of roads within the planned area should have a link-to-node ratio of 1.3 or 1.4. This plan achieves a ratio of 1.38.**

A link-to-node ratio is a measure of interconnection in a neighborhood - of how easy it is to move from one part of the neighborhood to another without having to go onto the highway. It's the number of links - sections of road between intersections - divided by the number of nodes - intersections and cul-de-sac heads. For example, in the illustration, the link-to-node ratio is 1.2 (42 links and 32 nodes).



**Emerging strips along arterial roads without public sewerage should make engineered community subsurface wastewater disposal systems part of the design from the beginning.**

**Allow for development in phases.**

**Use open space for protection of regulated resources, working lands, for green infrastructure, amenities, and containment that provides identity for the hamlet and privacy for residences.**

**Preserve and add view lines from the highway to the new 100% location.**

**KEY**

- Existing Building
- Proposed Commercial/Convenience
- Proposed Light Industrial/Distribution
- Proposed Residential
- Wetlands
- 10' Corridor
- Trails

5 Acres  
1 Acre



**TOPSHAM: ROUTE 196/RIVER ROAD**  
**Emerging Rural Commercial Strip**  
 A New Vision for Maine's Highway Commercial Strips  
 A GrowSmart Maine Project

Design assistance and graphics by  
**tj&a**  
 Terence J. Darwin & Associates  
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# Belfast: Suburban Aging Shopping Center

## Objectives

The objectives of the re-envisioned Renys Plaza center were to:

- Improve center profitability for the owner; and
- Improve the function of the shopping center and immediately surrounding area as an activity center consistent with best land use-transportation practices

## Renys Plaza and Surrounding Suburban Commercial Strip Development





Evaluate surrounding undeveloped or partially developed lands for the possibility of trails or other pedestrian connections:

- Pedestrian connections may serve as a way to interconnect with potential consumers within walking distance and as a recreational amenity for entertainment or hospitality uses that may be appropriate for the center. Include areas set aside to preserve wetlands or for management of storm water as this may be prime areas for a trail network.

Superimpose for consistency a crossroads configuration to and within the parking lot:

- Align the crossroads explicitly with adjacent roads and access points to adjacent properties. Examine the road layout within a 0.25 to 0.5 mile radius for possibilities of connecting to land uses that can support the shopping center and that improves accessibility from them - for example, office workers who might patronize a restaurant in the center.
- Convert two or more parking aisles into internal roads that provide "frontage" and "corners" for additional productive building space - which may be smaller structures that can be built and market incrementally or a larger structure for a use that fulfills a market need, such as a hotel.

At the end of internal roads, "terminate the view" with an important structure:

- Provide a long view to the entry of an anchor store, a new building on an outparcel, or a structure that serves as part of the brand of the center to help focus consumer.

Identify underused portion of parking lot and designate for redevelopment:

- Identify underused parking by observation over different peak periods;
- Guide: Underused parking should at the least represent a general area of the lot that has significant excess parking usage during the 20th highest hour of the year in terms of parking demand, as defined by the Urban Land Institute in Parking Requirements for Shopping Centers. This typically occurs during the afternoon of a day in the second week of December;
- To get a true picture of areas of excess parking, consider parking spaces for employees to be revealed to locations that may be inaccessible for customers (e.g., behind center buildings with access via an employee entrance or back door), such that employees are not using desirable areas of the parking lot - whether for customer parking or redevelopment.

Consider uses that have strong synergies with other uses in the center or immediate area (e.g., within one-quarter mile):

- If a portion of the center is relatively unproductive, has chronic vacancy or attracts tenants only at rates that are heavily subsidized by others, assign residual value to it and compare this value with the cost/value of demolition and replacement with a new use for which there appears to be demand and higher value.

Design the redevelopment strategy in a way that can be phased, such that earlier phases can help finance later phases.

PHASE 2: REDEVELOP CORE RETAIL CENTER

PHASE 1: HOTEL, OFFICE AND INFILL RETAIL



EXISTING RENYS CENTER, ROUTE 3, BELFAST, MAINE

Table 1. On-Site Suggestion and Synergy in Mixed-Use Projects

Land Use	Synergy of Suggestion*			
	Retail	Hotel	Entertainment	Business
Office	***	****	****	****
Residential	***	**	****	****
Hotel	****	****	****	****
Retail	****	****	****	****
Entertainment	****	****	****	****
Business/Professional	****	****	****	****

\* Synergy is measured by the degree to which the uses are complementary, such as their shared needs and resources.  
 \*\* Business and food services are the main source of benefits for offices.  
 \*\*\* Office and food services are the main source of benefits for hotels.  
 \*\*\*\* Office and food services are the main source of benefits for retail.  
 Source: Urban Land Institute, "Mixed-Use Development: A Guide to Success," Washington, DC, 2003, p. 68.

Define the front corners and the frontages of the development

- Use structures or landscaping elements to define the point of entry, give visibility to the new uses placed in these corners along the frontage, and provide a long view to the anchor store from the point of entry.

Design as close to a Floor Area Ratio (FAR) of 0.4 as possible.

- A FAR of 0.4 is still low density and suburban in scale, but may be sufficient to create a new look, feel, and vibrancy of a center, with good potential for parking and walking to fulfill multiple needs.
- Consider the addition of one or more uses (or replacement of obsolete uses) with a use that is able to share existing parking (because of differing peak periods of activity (e.g., business hotel with retail, offices with sit-down restaurants with evening service)).
- Consider adding stories, either by attracting a multi-story use, such as a hotel or office building, or by the addition of second-story space that appeals to certain sectors, such as small professional offices and, depending on the configuration of the center and the immediately surrounding area, apartments.
- Consider incorporation of parallel parking along internal roads that do not directly serve angled or 90-degree parking (for example, if a former parking aisle was converted into an internal road for footage for additional development).

Existing conditions Parcel data		
8.8 acres	383,328 sq ft	
existing parking	366 spaces	
Existing FAR	0.13	
Existing parking ratio	5 spaces per 1,000	
Existing use mix		
Retail	88.0%	
Service	11.0%	
Hospitality	0.0%	
Office	0.0%	
Restaurant	1.0%	
Proposed conditions Parcel Data		
Proposed FAR	0.38	
Proposed Parking	389 spaces	
Parking Ratio	3.00 spaces per 1,000	
Proposed use mix		
Retail	43%	
Service	6%	
Hospitality	28%	
Office	15%	
Restaurant	8%	

Design assistance and graphics by:



## BELFAST: RENYS PLAZA

### Graying Suburban Strip Center

A New Vision for Maine's Highway Commercial Strips  
 A GrowSmart Maine Project

# Augusta: In-Town, State House Neighborhood

## Objectives

The objectives of the re-envisioned center were to:

- Re-brand the center as distinct from newer, competing centers, enhancing its profitability
- Improve function of the shopping center and immediately surrounding area as an activity center, consistent with best land use – transportation practices
- Consider how Augusta Plaza and the adjacent Maine DOT Motor Garage

## Augusta Plaza and Surroundings



An older shopping center along an urban arterial faces constraints to redevelopment as a more vital "smart growth" node:

- The constraints of past decisions that limit flexibility
- The constraints of the site, which is smaller and lighter than competing suburban locations;
- The constraints of the surrounding area with limited opportunity to assemble land or change circulation patterns.

An older shopping center along an urban arterial has an array of assets that present opportunities for profitable redevelopment:

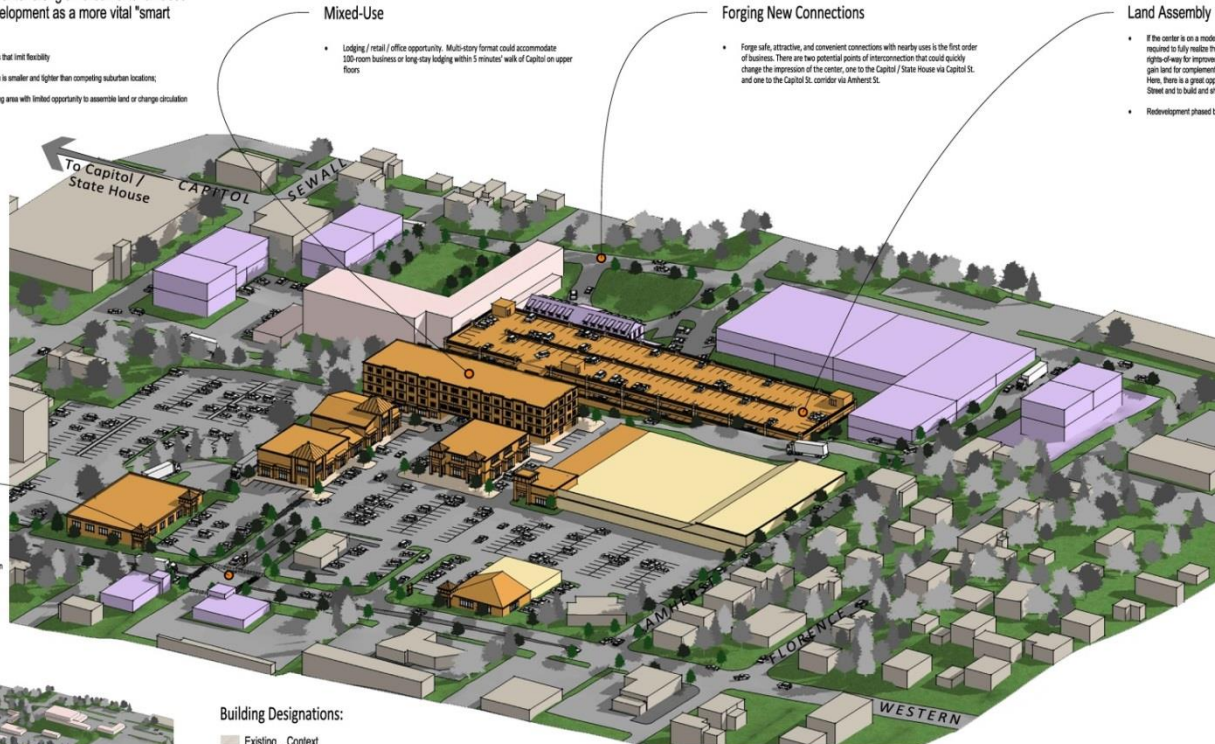
- proximity to a built-in population and flows of people - including surrounding, often densely settled neighborhood and commuter traffic headed to in-town jobs;
- traffic signals that slowstop traffic, increasing exposure time for potential customers;
- proximity to synergistic uses and activities with which to forge connections;
- in some cases, adjacency to properties that have become obsolete or underused in their locations and are ripe for combining with the center;
- existing local roads that, although they may need improvement, can be used to give more porosity to the site and create better inter-neighborhood connections;
- the relative ease of re-branding the development in a highly visible location;
- on an already urbanized site, fewer natural resource constraints to face in the permitting process;
- political support attached to redevelopment of an urban site

Main point of access to new internal "Main Street":

- Take greater advantage of the traffic signal at the main point of access to the site. The signal is a must for centers along heavily traveled arterials - many transit users insist on it because it guarantees safe left-hand turns into and out of the property, and it can be part of the announcement of the center itself. Align the interior "main street" with the signal with an important building at the opposite end of the interior "Main Street." This "Main Street" provides footage for significant new development.



EXISTING AUGUSTA PLAZA,  
WESTERN AVE. AUGUSTA, MAINE



**Mixed-Use**

- Lodging / retail / office opportunity. Multi-story format could accommodate 100-room business or long-stay lodging within 5 minutes' walk of Capitol on upper floors

**Forging New Connections**

- Forge safe, attractive, and convenient connections with nearby uses is the first order of business. There are two potential points of interconnection that could quickly change the impression of the center, one to the Capitol / State House via Capitol St. and one to the Capitol St. corridor via Amherst St.

**Land Assembly**

- If the center is on a modest parcel, some degree of land assembly likely will be required to fully realize the potential of a re-envisioned site - whether to obtain rights-of-way for improved connections to customers in the surrounding area or to gain land for complementary uses or for auxiliary services such as a parking facility. Here, there is a great opportunity to acquire rights for connections from Capitol Street and to build and share a parking garage.
- Redevelopment phased based on availability of adjacent parcel.

An urbanized redevelopment plan should reasonably aim for:

- 35 - 45 % of site footage devoted to building walls located within 0 to 50 feet of the front property line - enough to create an identity and sense of containment but preserving view lines to the site's anchor and other businesses deep into the site;
- a floor area ratio (total floor area as a percent of total land area in parcels) of at least 0.4, if a parking deck is used, 0.5;
- off-street parking at a rate of 2.5 spaces per 1000 SF of leasable floor area, which should be sufficient if the mix of uses includes activities with different peak demand periods, and if newly forged connections with destinations are within a quarter-mile increase pedestrian traffic;
- a mix of uses that includes - in addition to retail and take-out restaurants - office, live-work, and lodging uses that take advantage of proximity to in-town activities and newly forged connections to them;
- incorporation of a quasi-main street within the site, lined up with the primary access into the site and formed by new development

Design as close to a Floor Area Ratio [FAR] of 0.4 as possible (0.5 or more if using parking garage):

Existing Conditions Parcel Data	
Existing parking	473,497 sq ft
Existing FAR	0.27
Existing parking ratio	0.27 spaces per 1,000
Existing Use Mix	
Retail	79.1%
Service	0.0%
Hospitality	0.0%
Office	11.8%
Restaurant	3.4%
Proposed Conditions Parcel Data	
Proposed FAR	0.51
Proposed parking	304 spaces
Parking Ratio	2.62 spaces per 1,000
*Includes 2 FIs of Parking Garage	
Proposed Use Mix	
Retail	30%
Service	6%
Hospitality	30%
Office	18%
Restaurant	10%

**Building Designations:**

- Existing \_ Context
- Existing \_ Augusta Plaza
- Existing \_ Maine DOT
- Proposed \_ Augusta Plaza
- Proposed \_ Potential Neighboring Development

# AUGUSTA: AUGUSTA PLAZA

## Graying Urban Strip Center

A New Vision for Maine's Highway Commercial Strips  
A GrowSmart Maine Project

Design assistance and graphics by:



Creative effort is underway to transform commercial strips from “anywhere USA” stop-and-go experiences, to landscaped, pedestrian friendly, multi-activity designed “places”.

This transformation will take time and is not without its challenges:

Financial costs, political will, economic considerations, community consensus, parking considerations, business needs/interests, long-term process and implementation .



## **“Lessons Learned” are significant, including:**

- engage property owners from the beginning and often;
- involve local officials early and often;
- public safety engagement important.
- explain financial impact early on;
- use visualization techniques to show new ideas;
- build support with as many constituencies as possible by developing a shared vision;
- consider incremental steps; “good” is a success;
- create public places first;
- And finally, be bold and be patient.



To download the full report visit:  
<http://www.growsmartmaine.org/highway-strip>



- Illustrative plan created by the Town Planning & Urban Design Collaborative, LLC for the town of Yarmouth