

Principally Residential - Low density

Lower-Intensity residential neighborhoods across the City of South Burlington share commonalities in development patterns and history, but also, and more importantly, they share goals for the future.

History and Characteristic Features

The City's earliest neighborhood, Queen City Park, was initially built primarily as summer camps which have been converted over time to year-round homes. Beginning in earnest after the end of World War II, relatively low-density residential neighborhoods sprung up primarily along the existing transportation corridors of Williston Road and Shelburne Road, but were not integrated with those commercial corridors. These early neighborhoods include Chamberlin, The Orchards, Mayfair Park, Brookwood, Shunpike Road, and East Terrace. Over the following decades, neighborhoods with similar development patterns — primarily single-family homes and duplexes on approximately ¼-acre lots with backyards and driveways from local-traffic streets — were constructed. Generally, heights and building sizes are lower in these areas and the land use is overwhelmingly residential. In some cases, small-scale non-residential uses, including places of worship, stores, cemeteries, or pre-existing businesses are lightly interspersed.

Neighborhoods built in the following decades, such as Butler Farms, Country Club Estates, the Golf Course, and Quarry Ridge Road share similar characteristics but often have larger homes on larger lots, are further removed from commercial areas, and have homes that are more oriented to rear yards than to the street.

Most recently, some trends have been reversed through City policies and residents' wishes. Neighborhoods such as South Village, Rye Circle, and O'Brien Hillside are returning to smaller homes on smaller lots, a greater street presence, neighborhood parks, and, most recently, incorporation of neighborhood-scale commercial activities.

Primarily residential neighborhoods can enable a strong sense of community and identity if well laid out and built. Nearby elementary schools and parks, front porches, yards, and low-traffic streets can be attractive to young families. In some cases — notably in the older neighborhoods — homes are smaller and have remained comparatively affordable. Some residents in these neighborhoods have lived there for decades after buying their homes as “starter homes”.

Analysis and Objectives

The relatively low density — typically two to four dwellings units per acre — means fewer people live within walking distance of each other, the schools, any nearby commercial areas, or recreational areas. Intense demand for housing and employment growth in Chittenden County and other pressures over several decades have upended the economics of these neighborhoods. New development at these densities has consistently been of larger, much higher-priced housing, and prices for homes in existing neighborhoods are significantly outpacing income growth in the area.

As the City's first residential neighborhoods reach the 80-year mark, reinvestment in public infrastructure to meet society's changing needs is necessary. This includes retrofitting of road rights-of-way to meet ADA standards, support pedestrian and bicycle transportation, and account for changes in travel and work patterns; rebuilding existing parks; and improving access and availability of

neighborhood-scale facilities and services. Fostering the thriving of these neighborhoods into the future requires allowing and investing in community gathering spaces, whether publicly or privately owned, and clean, safe, and welcoming streetscapes.

These low-density neighborhoods vary in location, but share similar transportation challenges. All were developed to be car-centric, without significant commercial activity co-located with residential uses and requiring a car (or limited transit) to reach essential shopping, services, medical offices, and similar. Streets were designed for car traffic and many streets lack sidewalks, bike lanes, and other bike/ped infrastructure. Public transit services generally do not travel into these neighborhoods and they are only served by transit by stops along transportation corridors on their edges, if at all. The location of these neighborhoods places them adjacent to transportation corridors like Shelburne Road, Williston Road, and Hinesburg Road that can both connect the neighborhoods and isolate them.

Current regulations in many of these neighborhoods have maximum density of four residences per acre, and require the same amount of land per dwelling unit regardless of building type, but this was not always the case. For example, the Chamberlin neighborhood has a sprinkle of duplexes and a few triplexes on lots the same size as adjacent single family homes, and numerous undersized lots that would not be permissible today. These current nonconformities have had so little impact on the character of the area that many would be hard-pressed to identify their locations. Allowing duplexes and similar-scale multi-family housing by right where single-family homes are allowed would have little impact on the character of these post-war neighborhoods, would allow more flexibility for families to live together but separately on the same property, and could provide more affordable housing and more rental opportunities.

These neighborhoods generally do not contain much, if any, commercial use. It is not intended that the primary character of the neighborhood should shift from residential to commercial. Adding small amounts of pedestrian-scale, neighborhood-serving commercial uses supports the future health and thriving of the neighborhood. This could include small-scale uses like neighborhood-serving stores, cafes, and shops, small business offices, arts & culture education businesses and non-profits, and community spaces. Adding a small amount of this kind of small commercial use would improve the walkability/bikeability of the neighborhood and could become community hubs.

Some of these neighborhoods have city-maintained park spaces either in the neighborhood or on the edges (e.g. Szysmanski Park, Jaycee Park), but many do not or are underserved by spaces or amenities within walking distance of their homes. Supporting these neighborhoods into a thriving future requires investment into neighborhood-scale park spaces with amenities appropriate to the setting within walking distance from the homes. Supporting these parks will require a higher population within walking distance resulting from allowing a more diverse range of housing types, increasing allowed density, reducing dimensional requirements, or all of these.

To help residents to stay in their neighborhoods through the various stages of their lives, and create affordable opportunities for future generations, this Plan supports a combination of thoughtful and context-sensitive infill housing, investment in public infrastructure and parks, and allowances for neighborhood-scale retail and services.

Principally Residential – Higher Density

Like the lower-intensity residential neighborhoods, higher-intensity neighborhoods also share some common development patterns and history, and share goals for the future.

History and Characteristic Features

South Burlington has primarily residential areas that are moderate to high density and have some different characteristics, considerations and challenges from the lower density primarily residential areas. A shift in development patterns starting in the late 1960s saw an increase in more dense residential development and in multi-family housing development that has continued to the present. The first iterations of these neighborhoods included two-story townhomes / flats in areas along Kennedy Drive, Hinesburg Road between Kennedy and Tilley Drive, portions of Dorset Street north of Swift Street, and in some locations like Joy Drive and Stonehedge.

Later iterations transitioned to multi-story residential buildings in areas like Farrell Street, Quarry Hill Road, Olde Orchard Park, portions of Allen Road, and Lime Kin Road.

Most recently, these neighborhoods are becoming more blended, integrated, or placed adjacent to within the City's historically commercial corridors, including in City Center, along Kennedy Drive near Kimball Ave, and along the Shelburne Road corridor.

Many townhouse and condominium developments have been constructed, generally close to transportation corridors and reasonably well located close to services, retail, and employment opportunities. Some areas have light levels of integrated commercial uses, but these tend to be small-scale (e.g. single offices or small office buildings, single retail establishments, educational facilities and child care) and/or neighborhood-serving.

Analysis and Objectives

Some higher-density developments are up to 40 years old and some are extremely new, having been constructed in the last few years. This range in ages creates a range of range of development styles, ripeness for update or redevelopment, and compliance with current building codes and standards. It also means the transportation network, streetscape, and community gathering spaces also range widely and need to be evaluated for potential to bring up to current community standards.

Transportation to and from areas of higher-density residential must focus on multi-modal transportation options. This allows parking for these areas to be reduced and for the areas to become more pedestrian-scaled and welcoming. Some areas are connected well by sidewalks, shared use paths, and bike lanes, but other areas need their bike/ped network to be completed. Because of the inherently higher population density than the lower-density residential areas (on average), higher-density residential areas tend to be better served by public transit, but this is not universally true. Higher-density areas can also enable greater transit service due to higher population densities. The higher number of residents in these areas also means that more people are affected by investment (and failure to invest) in construction and maintenance of the transportation network, necessarily making them a priority for City operations.

Like in the low-density residential, additional neighborhood-scale and neighborhood serving commercial use can be integrated into the higher-density residential areas. Small retail and restaurant

establishments, health and wellness businesses, child care and education facilities, community gathering spaces and arts businesses, medical offices, and service businesses (e.g. hair salons, massage therapists, and similar) can add to the vibrancy of a neighborhood and reduce the need to drive to other areas for goods and services. The higher population density in these areas can support more of these small businesses and entities, increasing the diversity of establishments included.

Due to both City regulations and aesthetic considerations, many existing higher-density and/or multi-family housing developments include some amount of common green space, but many are not designed for particular functions or to be used for community gathering. Maximizing site usage, reducing costs, and complying with environmental regulations, developers have historically left wetlands, slopes, and similarly unbuildable areas open. Those kinds of areas are not generally suitable or attractive for community uses like play space, gatherings, or gardening, leaving less area available for those kinds of amenities on-site. New regulations require more intentional site amenities and/or civic spaces in developments, but it remains to be seen how effective those regulations are at creating usable and desirable semi-public spaces.

Higher-density residential living necessarily provides for less individually- or household-controlled outdoor space. This increases the need for intentional, well-maintained, and appropriately-sized recreational amenities. Some higher-density areas are in walking distance to a recreational amenity, but several are not, and the continued growth of these areas will require more public outdoor space. Space is required both for personal recreation (passive, active, or otherwise) but also for community gathering, and a range of types of gathering spaces will be required for different age groups, lifestyles, and needs. This should include seated conversation areas, active play spaces, dog facilities, trails, maintained green space, accessible facilities, and similar, as appropriate for the size of space, location, and surrounding community.