

Preserving a Special Place: Growth Management in Fort Mill, South Carolina

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Small towns throughout the country are struggling to balance the need for economic development with the desire to preserve a distinct local character. Until now, these communities have virtually toiled alone. Thanks to the Conservation Foundation, a new partnership - with access to a nationwide network of growth management specialists - is emerging.

The Conservation Foundation's Successful Communities Program.

The Conservation Foundation is a nonprofit organization which was founded in 1948. It is dedicated to improving the quality of the environment through wise use of the earth's resources. Its long standing interest and involvement in land conservation and development issues emphasize a comprehensive approach. Through public advocacy, characterized by reason and balance, cooperative problem solving, and the development of new ideas, it seeks effective solutions to current and emerging environmental problems. The Foundation has developed a long record of important research into the issues facing all levels of government as they struggle to ensure a clean and safe environment.

The *Successful Communities* Program is an attempt by the Foundation to address the issue of growth management at the local government level. Uncontrolled growth is especially threatening since many small towns rely on volunteer governments which lack the time and resources to adequately confront the problem. As development engulfs an area, many of the prime resources which lend a community its uniqueness are lost under a blanket of asphalt.

Successful Communities is designed to assist local governments in managing development to protect their unique resources. Several small towns were selected to work with *Successful Communities* in developing a plan for growth management. Fort Mill was the first of these communities.

In addition to technical assistance, The Successful Communities Land Trust was established to assist concerned citizens in acquiring important property threatened by development. A research and education effort is underway to build a network of individuals who are

concerned with growth management and want to share successful techniques for addressing its related problems.

The Town of Fort Mill

At first glance, Fort Mill, South Carolina would appear to be an ideal community. Located just 15 miles south of Charlotte, North Carolina it possesses traditional small-town charm, yet the opportunities of a large city are nearby. The area's educational and recreational systems are superlative. The booming Charlotte economy keeps unemployment low. The rural countryside provides an attractive atmosphere for the town. Open fields and heavy forests border the highways to and from Fort Mill.

In spite of the advantages they enjoy, the citizens of Fort Mill are worried. Rapid growth and development from Charlotte threaten to destroy their high quality of life. Suburban housing developments are being built in the area at an astounding rate. Each year hundreds of new students flood the school system. The parents of these children commute to Charlotte for work each morning, clogging a traffic system more suited to occasional farm trucks than commuters. The scenic countryside is rapidly changing from productive farmland and historic homesteads, to an endless string of suburban developments.

The Town Takes Action

Citizen concern has prompted the government of Fort Mill to be among the first in South Carolina to address the issue of growth management. In April of 1988, the Fort Mill Town Council voted to form a partnership with *Successful Communities*. Over the next two years, Fort Mill and *Successful Communities* will work together to study the problems that threaten the area's high quality of life and devise a plan to address these issues. By addressing

the problem of rapid development now, the town hopes to retain its special qualities as it continues to grow.

Successful Communities set out to build a wide base of support for its involvement in Fort Mill before committing any resources to the project. Official invitations from both government and business leaders were prerequisites for proceeding with the program. Representatives from *Successful Communities* visited Fort Mill to address the concerns of local citizens about the changes occurring in their town. The Chamber of Commerce, after meeting with Foundation staff, decided to officially invite *Successful Communities* to work in the town. A promising meeting was also held with the management of Spring's Industries, the multinational textile firm headquartered in Fort Mill. It was clear from these initial contacts that the Fort Mill business community, as well as its citizens, was concerned about the growth-related problems facing the town.

The town government was enthusiastic about the program. During the most recent municipal elections, planning for growth - especially its associated traffic problems - had become a hot political topic. The Fort Mill Town Council recognized it was faced with a problem that

was crucial to the future of the town. Solving the problem would require more planning expertise than the council had. The relationship with *Successful Communities* gives the town this planning capability.

Deciding What Is Important

Successful Communities established a four-stage workplan to address the growth problem in Fort Mill. The first stage involved conducting a comprehensive inventory of the important environmental resources in the area. Fort Mill Township contains many environmentally sensitive areas which should be preserved. These areas are important to the heritage of both the community and South Carolina.

Assistance from the South Carolina Land Resources Commission was invaluable in compiling a mapping system which contains all sensitive resources. These resources were digitized onto a series of computer maps. Placing this data in a computerized format allows the planning system to be flexible and updated easily. Each map was overlaid to create a composite of the study area. Such a geographic information system (GIS) can be used as



Confederate Park, located in downtown Fort Mill, is dedicated to the sons of Fort Mill who gave their lives in the Civil War.

follows: if the town wants to restrict new construction to areas within a specified number of feet from water and sewer lines, which rest on soil suitable to building, and which do not infringe upon an environmentally sensitive area, the computer can create a land use plan that meets these criteria. While this capability is becoming commonplace in large cities, its use in rural South Carolina is new. It puts Fort Mill at the forefront in computer planning capability in the Southeast.

History is important to the people of Fort Mill and is perhaps the town's greatest asset. Unfortunately, rapid growth tends to mar the historic appearance of a community as new construction either buries important structures under asphalt or destroys the character of what was once a close-knit neighborhood. Prior efforts by the local chamber of commerce had generated an inventory of landmarks important to the town's development. *Successful Communities* has begun a complete historical survey utilizing the services of a professional consultant. This survey will produce a comprehensive record of the town's architecture and development. Adding the survey data to the GIS system will produce an additional layer of information demonstrating what historic areas need to be considered for protection.

The inventory includes resources which are not easily labeled. Intangible aspects of a community are important as they add to its quality of life. The small town atmosphere and varied population mix of Fort Mill make it attractive. These resources will be stressed in the inventory; a focal point of the program will be to ensure that they remain a part of life in Fort Mill.

Each Community Needs a Vision of Its Future

Successful Communities has attempted to involve a wide spectrum of Fort Mill society in the debate over the direction of the community. The second stage of the project entails a series of community meetings aimed at creating a vision of the future for the town. The result of these meetings will be a vision statement, spelling out what makes Fort Mill special to its citizens and what needs to be done to protect the unique qualities of the town. This vision statement will serve as a road map to the Fort Mill of the future.

The preparation of this vision statement has been a cooperative effort between the business community and the government. The Chamber of Commerce's Conservation and Revitalization Committee is working with *Successful Communities* to ensure that economic growth is compatible with Fort Mill's small-town nature. Using a questionnaire published in the local newspaper, the committee has identified the revitalization of downtown as its primary objective. Like many downtowns across the country, the central business district has been losing the battle with

regional shopping malls. The failure to maintain this downtown would not only have severe economic effects for Fort Mill, but also undermine the cultural cohesiveness of the community.

The town council is participating in the vision-setting stage through the establishment of a Successful Communities Task Force. This broad-based group has pinpointed several potential problems the town needs to address. While the tangible resources of the area are considered important, the task force has identified the maintenance of a small-town atmosphere as the most important objective of the program. With the influx of new citizens into housing developments on the outskirts of the town, the goal is to maintain Fort Mill's identity as a distinct community, instead of allowing it to become just another bedroom of nearby Charlotte. Instilling into the new citizens a sense of identity with the rich tradition of Fort Mill will be a cornerstone of the plan to maintain the town's uniqueness.

The cooperation of both business and government is essential to a successful growth management program in Fort Mill. Similar efforts have failed when citizens and developers became hostile over attempts to plan for quality development. Developers often see citizen attempts to control growth as a threat to the profitability of their projects. The "not-in-my-backyard" syndrome often causes citizens to cut off negotiations with developers instead of seeking mutually beneficial solutions to their concerns. Efforts at keeping communication in Fort Mill open have been successful as the area's two largest developers sit on the Chamber of Commerce's committee working on the project. This involvement will help ensure that mutually beneficial solutions to the area's growth problems are reached.

Protecting Special Resources

The inventory of important resources and citizen vision-setting will support the third segment of *Successful Communities'* involvement in Fort Mill: compiling a workable plan to protect the town from uncontrolled growth. While the comprehensive plan is scheduled to be completed in March of 1989, many of the plan's components are already being put in place. It is essential that mechanisms to carry out growth management techniques be established in order to allow smooth implementation of a master plan. Fort Mill lacked many of these mechanisms. It has relied on a small administrative staff to supplement a volunteer government. Putting planning mechanisms in place will allow the town to swiftly carry out those policies it decides to pursue.

When the comprehensive growth management plan is completed in March 1989, it will tie these projects in with other tools to address the long term needs of Fort



The Oliver House, built in the 1890's, is an example of the unique charm that the people of Fort Mill want to preserve.

Mill. Primary among the issues requiring action is the protection of sensitive environmental areas which are threatened by the rapid development. A land use plan will be developed to guide development away from sensitive areas and towards those places where the natural environment is capable of adequately absorbing growth.

The Fort Mill Town Council voted unanimously to establish a Historic Landmarks Commission to address the protection of historic architecture. The commission was granted the authority of architectural review on new construction and external alterations within historic districts. It has only now begun to consider what areas should be included within historic districts. The commission's recommendations will be included in the comprehensive report to town council for enactment. When the council approves a historic protection plan, an administrative body will be in place to administer the accompanying regulations.

Aesthetic controls will be a major concern to Fort Mill. Often new construction appears bland as developers rush to make a profit from rapidly increasing demand. If

left unchecked, this "sameness" will destroy the architectural character which lends a town its uniqueness. Besides the historic districts already discussed, the town will consider design guidelines for new construction within its zoning authority. Implementation of design guidelines allows a community to control the appearance of new buildings and preserve its architectural character.

A comprehensive county billboard-control ordinance has also been prepared. While Fort Mill has regulated billboards for years, it has felt the effect of the failure of York County to effectively address the problem. Many of the highways leading to the town lie outside its zoning jurisdiction and have become overrun with massive billboards. It will take a decision by the county council to solve the problem and passage of the ordinance is a lengthy process. Public concern over the billboard problem makes the passage of stricter controls probable.

Fort Mill's traffic problem required immediate attention as downtown Fort Mill had become a primary route for commuters traveling to Charlotte each day. Effective lobbying of the South Carolina Department of

Transportation moved the construction of a bypass around Fort Mill to the top of the State's highway priority list. *Successful Communities* has begun negotiations with the National Park Service to involve NPS in the design of the highway to ensure that it enhances the scenic beauty of the route while solving the town's traffic problems. Designating the bypass a scenic corridor where development is controlled will protect the view along the route.

Planning and regulations can not take the place of civic-minded citizens. Fort Mill has been blessed by the decision of the area's largest landowners to remove from development a large section of their property, creating a greenbelt around Fort Mill. This greenbelt will protect the town from overdeveloping and provide excellent recreational opportunities. The greenbelt contains prime agricultural lands, historic sites, and scenic vistas. *Successful Communities*, realizing that this project is of significant importance to the future livability of the town, is currently attempting to have other landowners contribute to the plan and complete the greenbelt to the south of Fort Mill.

Implementation: The Crucial Stage

Implementation is the crucial stage in any growth management program. Many of the steps necessary to effectively preserve a community's character will impact upon the rights of landowners. The implementation stage is what makes *Successful Communities* different from private consultants. *Successful Communities* is designed to work with Fort Mill to put into practice the steps spelled out in the comprehensive plan. Implemented land use policies, not the plan itself, will help manage growth in Fort Mill.

Implementation will once again require the cooperative efforts of developers and government. The involvement of varied interests in the planning stage will help provide for a smooth implementation. The Fort Mill and York County governments will have to implement land use regulations which will be unfamiliar to this area of South Carolina. Developers will find that they must factor in different restraints when calculating the profitability of their projects. Growth management can be compatible with all interests. Quality development provides a high return for the developer and protects the special character of a community. Demonstrating this compatibility is the crucial step for growth management advocates in Fort Mill.

Fort Mill and *Successful Communities* have no illusions about the difficulty of implementing an effective growth management program. Negotiation and compromise will be necessary as competing interests react to different proposals. The need for growth management never ends. Policies which were effective in the past at

controlling development require continuous reexamination. New problems need to be studied and original solutions developed for the area's changing needs. The parties involved should frequently ask themselves, "Are we achieving what we intended when we started?"

Conclusion

Fort Mill has taken the first step toward protecting its small town character by realizing that a problem looms on the horizon. It has responded to this threat by deciding to take control of its destiny by employing appropriate techniques to mitigate the problems accompanying rapid growth. Logical solutions, based on well-thought-out planning, can guide and control growth in a way that preserves the things citizens consider dear. These solutions will require debate and hard decisions. Some decisions will be difficult to make as they require government to regulate the use of land in new ways. These new solutions can benefit all the citizens of Fort Mill.

The town's partnership with *Successful Communities* is a statement by Fort Mill that its citizens are concerned about what is happening to their town and that they can shape what their community becomes. This long-range outlook can only help preserve for future Fort Mill citizens the benefits that current residents have refused to take for granted. Growth and change can be good for a community. But when growth threatens to destroy the very things which attracted people to an area, it needs to be controlled. Quality development is what Fort Mill desires. Fort Mill is taking steps which will ensure that the changes occurring daily do not destroy the rich character of this special community. □

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