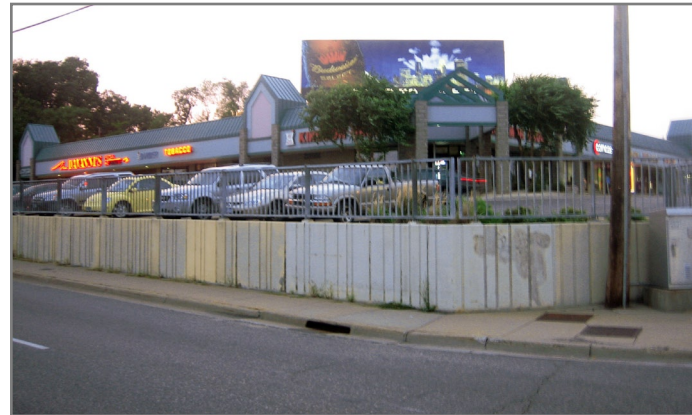


Community Character

Introduction

What defines the character of a community? Character is all about how a place looks and feels. Memorable places are those that have character. Character is typically expressed either in terms of a place's natural or built environment. In Richfield's case, major natural amenities don't form the backdrop for the community nor are they interwoven throughout the fabric of the city. The character of Richfield is predominately defined by the built environment. It is largely expressed in site design, architectural aesthetics, building/street relationships, the scale of buildings, the time period in which things were built and the appeal of public and private spaces. These built elements establish the identity of the place and influence people's perceptions. Although the built environment is the key definer of the community's character, the natural environment also plays a role. The Woodlake Nature Center and the mature canopy of trees that are scattered across the landscape help define Richfield's sense of place.



Many of Richfield's businesses retain elements of their past despite facade and site improvements. Penn Avenue and 66th Street today and as it existed in 1960s.

So what is the character of Richfield? Richfield's character can't be summarized by one or two simple phrases. Terms that are currently used by various groups within the community to define the character of the place include:

- Urban Home Town
- Minnesota's Oldest Suburb
- Suburban Community with a Small Town Heart
- Proudly Suburban Since 1852

Since three out of four of these statements use the word suburb, perhaps few would dispute the fact that Richfield is a suburb. As one of the statements proudly boasts, it is Minnesota's first suburb! Simply calling a place a suburb doesn't define its character. In order to assess Richfield's character, one has to exit the freeways that line the edges of the community and travel into its residential neighborhoods, its commercial nodes and experience its park and open space system. These places tell much of the story of Richfield and as much as anything, define its character.

Rather than coin yet another slogan that may describe the character of Richfield, the community character section of the Comprehensive Plan is focused more on defining the elements that contribute to the community's character. It lays out initiatives that need to be continually addressed to ensure that the qualities that have historically made Richfield what it

is today remain in place and are adjusted and enhanced to meet future lifestyles and technological advances.

Richfield conveys an image of being established. It has traditional residential neighborhoods built around a grid street system containing homes with consistent scales and setbacks. It is a green place. Street trees that were planted decades ago create a canopy of shade that is both comfortable and welcoming. Richfield is also a progressive place. Deteriorating buildings have been replaced by new development. The architecture of these places relates more to the contemporary design practices of today than it does to some specified or artificial theme. The design of City Bella has very little in common with the Best Buy corporate headquarters. Buildings in the Lyndale Gateway area differ from those in the adjacent Shoppes of Lyndale. These inconsistencies work quite well. They create a tapestry of development that blends together with each piece being unique in its own way.

So where does Richfield go from here? This Comprehensive Plan lays out a number of recommended physical improvements. Other changes will occur through actions in the private marketplace. Regardless of the source of proposed future changes, the following character influencing factors should be considered:

- Urban Design and Architecture
- Street Design and Block Patterns
- Corridors
- Gateways
- Sustainable Design
- Public Art
- Future Initiatives

Urban Design and Architecture

Urban design is the art of making places. It involves the design of buildings, groups of buildings, spaces and landscapes in the community to create successful development. Attention to urban design influences the overall design character of the entire city. It addresses issues such as districts and nodes, building locations and their relationship to each other, land use patterns, streets, parking and access. It generally envelops all elements that contribute to the attractiveness and function of the built environment.

Architectural features contribute largely to the relationship and character of the built environment. Despite its age, Richfield doesn't have a historic downtown. Accordingly it has no need for historic architectural guidelines. However, architectural guidelines can also apply to the broader community, addressing building facades, signage size and location, setbacks, building/street relationships, as

well as maintenance requirements. Many of these are regulated by various city codes and ordinances rather than by a specific set of required elements and materials.

As redevelopment projects are proposed in the future, it will be necessary to closely scrutinize the urban design and architectural elements of the project. Both are major contributors to the character of the City.



Roundabouts are new “character” elements in Richfield.

Street Design and Block Patterns

Streets are easy to take for granted but street design in Richfield is an extremely valuable foundation that defines the character of the city's residential neighborhoods. It influences who will use what road



Properties in the Lyndale Gateway area were replaced with a contemporary mixed-use development.

and how they will use it. Street pattern is one aspect that influences street design. Richfield's streets are arranged in manageable block sizes (approximately 300 feet on each side) and in only a few areas, include sidewalks. This grid establishes a character that promotes neighborhood cohesion. It could be strengthened by the further construction of additional sidewalks as referenced in the transportation section of this plan.

Street width is another primary component for defining the character of a street. Narrower streets feel more intimate and promote greater social interaction. Wider streets create an expanse between neighbors that is more difficult to overcome and also encourages car traffic to move at higher speeds. Accommodating on-street parking on wider streets works to narrow the travel lanes and define the transition between the street and sidewalk, creating a more comfortable and attractive environment for pedestrians.

Street amenities, including trees, planters, street lamps, furniture and signage all contribute to the appeal of a street. Such amenities further define the transition between space for cars and space for people, as well as the transition between public and private properties. Street amenities, and their specific design and placement, can unify an entire neighborhood or identify a place as being unique. They can also be

used to highlight the transition between two different neighborhoods or districts.

On larger arterial roads, design character is also crucial to consider. Accommodation of off-street trails for walkers and bikers should not be overlooked along roads that primarily handle higher volumes of car traffic. Street amenities, such as street trees and attractive lighting, will also soften the experience of large roads and create a more positive user experience.

Corridors

The appearance of heavily traveled roadways and streets contributes to the character of a community. Major roadway corridors can be improved in a number of ways. Most significantly, streetscape improvements can go a long way toward enhancing a community's image.

Richfield has a number of corridors that are significant. Routes like Lyndale Avenue, Penn Avenue, Nicollet Avenue, Portland Avenue and 76th Street are important but perhaps 66th Street, more than any roadway in Richfield, has the biggest impact. The streetscape along 66th Street is inconsistent. As the road enters Richfield on the west, the character is largely commercial up to and just beyond Penn Avenue. Between Penn and I-35, abutting land uses are predominately residential. Sidewalks along these

portions of the road are located immediately behind the curb accommodating pedestrians but doing so in an uncomfortable way.

At I-35W, 66th Street passes under the gateway bridge that has become one of the city's entry features. The character of the roadway in the Lakes at Lyndale area and over to Nicollet Avenue is influenced by recent redevelopment projects that feature expanded pedestrian spaces, consistent lighting and added landscaping. From Nicollet Avenue east to its termination at the airport, 66th Street has a mix of adjacent land uses, some of which appear outdated and in need of improvement. It is in this stretch of the road, however, that two contemporary design features occur. At Portland Avenue and again at the eastern border, two new roundabouts have been built. These exist as both functional transportation improvements as well as aesthetic design features.

Richfield needs a long-term plan for the improvement of the 66th Street corridor to create a more functional and attractive "front door" route through the community. Most of the corridor suffers from inadequate sidewalks, inconsistent lighting and little, if any landscaping. As a follow-up to the adoption of the Comprehensive Plan, it is recommended that Richfield initiate a corridor study of 66th Street. Based on such a plan, improvements can be made in phases by the city and by Hennepin County as

future roadway improvements occur. Sustainable design patterns such as green infrastructure (rain gardens), native plantings, and features that relate to surrounding development patterns should be core elements of streetscape designs.



The 66th Street bridge at I-35W became much more of a character element for the city when it was reconstructed in the late 1990s.

Gateways

Richfield has a number of entry points that serve as primary gateways into the community. Most of



The Richfield Urban Village project incorporated a reconstructed Richfield Bank and Trust (now M&I Bank) as part of a mixed-use commercial/residential development.

these portals lie along major roadways such as Cedar Avenue, I-494, Highway 62, I-35W and 66th Street at the Edina border. Gateways such as these afford cities opportunities to differentiate themselves from adjacent communities by creating attractive gateway signage and landscaping features. Identity can be carried out in other parts of the city as well through other forms, such as landscaping, streetscape, lighting and signage.

At the present time, Richfield's strongest gateway "markers" are the I-35W bridge at 66th Street and the roundabout along 66th Street just west of Cedar Avenue. Markers can be features such as these or they can be simple, consistent entry signage. The City should examine primary community entrance points and assemble an overall plan that creates consistent imagery that informs people that they have entered Richfield.

Sustainable Design

Sustainability has recently evolved from a planning term to a way of life for most communities. For the Richfield Comprehensive Plan, sustainable is used to reflect a quality that is lasting, enduring and infinite. A common definition for sustainable development is a development pattern that accommodates present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In other words it

is a development pattern that lasts, endures and does not have an end life. This is important from a global perspective because of the notion that populations grow exponentially and land and natural resources are finite. Sustainability represents the interdependent relationship between Richfield and the natural ecosystem.

Sustainable development is synonymous with green building and green infrastructure. Recent publications by groups such as the Urban Land Institute (ULI) show expanding support for green building practices despite being more costly upfront because over time, the cost savings (benefits) due to reduced energy consumption, enhanced quality of life, and longer lasting materials outweigh the upfront costs.

Design character also considers how site and building design will contribute to the sustainability of the community. Sustainable building techniques, energy conservation practices and ecologically-sensitive site design and environmental protection all contribute to sustainable design character. By increasing attention to the sustainable design character of urban development in Richfield, negative impacts to the natural systems and environment can be reduced. The U.S. Green Building Council outlines strategies for increasing sustainability in a community in its document, LEED ND (Leadership for Energy and Environmental Design)

for Neighborhood Developments. Strategies focus on ways to promote livability, increase transportation efficiency, increase walkability, conserve land, and reduce stormwater impacts.

Sustainable building design is an important way to reduce environmental impacts and increase overall design character of the community. Sustainable design of buildings focuses on utilizing renewable and local resources, reducing energy consumption and limiting impacts to the surrounding natural environment.

Stormwater management is a large component of addressing sustainable design on a site. Contemporary stormwater management practices focus on treating stormwater runoff as close as possible to the source location in order to reduce negative impacts of sedimentation and pollution. Innovative stormwater management techniques include implementation of on-site infiltration using features such as bioswales and rain gardens. These are generally a depression or low area, planted with trees, shrubs and perennials, where water can collect and is allowed to infiltrate into the ground.

This type of treatment technique can be designed so that overflow runoff from one bioswale runs into the next lower bioswale, creating a linked system. Permeable pavers are another example of an on-site infiltration strategy that intercepts and transmits

runoff to permeable soils or gravel layers where pollutants are filtered, runoff is slowed, and water is allowed to infiltrate into the ground. An underground reservoir used in conjunction with pavers can hold large amounts of water to control runoff volumes. Pavers can be made of various materials and installed as roadways or parking surfaces.

Richfield can also encourage implementation of rooftop gardens or green roofs on both existing and new buildings. Green roofs are becoming increasingly popular and help reduce the volume of stormwater runoff and environmental heat gain. Studies indicate that green roofs reduce a building's contribution to stormwater runoff by up to seventy-five percent and can reduce the maximum roof-top temperature by more than sixty degrees.

Public Art

Cities are responding to the renewed interest in the desire for quality spaces and community identity. Public art is seen as an important ingredient. Some communities have formal public art programs, mostly utilizing a percent-for-art model (an ordinance mandating a portion of the city's capital budget be used for public art). Many more communities however, engage in public art activities without an ordinance or formal city program. These programs

are usually driven by a desire to have art in key public or private locations and are implemented in public-private partnerships between cities, developers and foundations.



Plazas, gardens and public art such as this area that is part of the Richfield Urban Village add character to the community.

Public art can play a role in enhancing Richfield as a destination, a distinct place within the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area. Expanding access to the arts enhances the quality of life in Richfield. Public art can also acknowledge and celebrate the city's history through commemorative art, memorials and interpretive projects.

In Richfield, public art was part of the redevelopment of the urban village at 66th Street and Lyndale Avenue. The plaza area that separates residential uses



Due to traffic volumes along Richfield's freeway corridor, the community has seen a significant amount of big box and shopping center development since 1990.

from commercial uses has a collection of sculptures. Recently, a bronze sculpture of a former city official was installed as part of the streetscape elements along Lyndale Avenue. These pieces add visual interest and enhanced the character of the area. Additional opportunities for public art should be considered as part of future redevelopment and improvement projects.

Future Initiatives

The 2008 Richfield Comprehensive Plan was assembled at a unique time in our history. In the near future, cities are almost assuredly going to face challenges that have not been considered in past

comprehensive planning efforts. Ever increasing concerns about traditional energy supplies and pricing have prompted communities to promote conservation and sustainability measures, the full scope of which cannot yet even be contemplated.

The way we live, work and play is ever evolving. The press recently reported that Best Buy, Richfield's largest employer and one of the biggest in the region, has almost 3,000 members of its staff that work off-site and rarely need to show up at the office. Employment and living patterns will continue to change. Accordingly, Richfield needs to remain flexible to future initiatives that will likely be elements that will impact both the character and sustainability aspects of the community. Some trends that may occur include:

- More people working from home, coffee shops and other non-office venues
- Increasing on-line purchasing changing traditional retailing
- Expanded recycling of materials used in everyday life
- Enhanced communication technologies including municipal wireless internet
- Neighborhood and community composting
- Enhance solar power, both passive and active
- Non-traditional power sources such as electric and/or hydrogen vehicle charging stations

The evolution of Richfield has been ongoing since 1853. Although future challenges and opportunities may be unprecedented by today's standards, Richfield's location, compact form of development and strong traditions will position it to retain its status as a great place to live and work.

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