

## Seeing the Benefits of Visually Specific Plans

By: John Clarke, Development and Design Coordinator

Most municipal plans set up generous commercial and residential zoning districts, and then the local boards react over time to piecemeal and often scattered private development proposals. In contrast, the Greenway Guides recommend that plans should instead identify **priority growth areas**, both infill redevelopment sites and land immediately around existing or proposed centers for walkable, mixed-use development. By achieving public consensus up front in the planning process and visually representing the specific locations and types of development a community would like to see, a design-oriented **illustrative plan** provides several advantages:

- **Focuses development** in the most efficient areas for infrastructure, transit, and walking connections;
- **Protects rural surroundings** from spread-out commercial strip and residential sprawl development;
- **Streamlines the review process** for projects consistent with adopted plans;
- **Spurs private investment** that fits in with existing neighborhood character; and
- **Promotes quality development** that is welcome within the community.

### Rhinebeck's Illustrative Plan

The 1993 Rhinebeck Village Master Plan is an early example of a visually specific plan with a long enough track record to measure its success. The Village Center Plan map initially identified historically compatible structures in the Rhinebeck Village Historic District, with specific gaps in the streetscape or incompatible buildings targeted for infill redevelopment.

As an inducement for better internal circulation and shared parking, desirable connections between parking lots and streets were shown. In addition, the subsequent zoning law cross referenced visual guidelines from [Greenway Connections](#), the [Town of Rhinebeck Design Standards](#), and Dutchess County Planning's 1994 Hamlet Design and Building Form Guidelines for preferred site and building designs.



*Shown here is a portion of Rhinebeck's 1993 Village Center Plan*

[Numbers correspond to photos below]

[Click here to see full plan](#)

## Positive Results

Since the adoption of the Village Center Plan, a majority of the major infill sites that were identified on the map have been redeveloped. Over the last ten years, more than 60,000 square feet of new commercial development have been completed in the Village Center, including adaptive reuse of existing structures and new infill buildings compatible in height, materials, and storefront characteristics with the Historic District. Two unsightly gas stations across from the historic Beekman Arms and Delamater House were removed, and two internal alley connections through private property have also been constructed for better public access.

Much of this private development may not have been directly inspired by the Village Center Plan, but in many key cases the Planning Board looked to the illustrative map as leverage to help push for public objectives outlined in the plan. After all, the implementation of **smart growth** principles means new development can correct past mistakes or make positive contributions, even in an intensely protected historic district, if it fulfills the goals of a publicly agreed-upon planning process.



*#1: A two-story 28,000 square foot retail/office building, winner of a 2005 Dutchess County Planning Federation award, replaced a vacant car sales lot.*



*#2: A former auto dealership and garage was transformed into attractive shops, a bookstore, and a restaurant with patio seating out front.*

The most complicated improvements involved the integration of three separate site plan applications to include shared parking arrangements, three new access drive connections, an expansion of a historic bank building, and the creation of eleven new storefront spaces and three second floor apartments in the heart of the Village Center ([click here for map](#)). The Planning Board coordinated negotiations among the initially reluctant property owners, using the site plan approval process and public meetings to gradually build cooperation.

Updated sketches from the 1993 Plan process proved that a shared central parking layout and a direct rear connection to the adjacent municipal lot would create better site circulation and substantially more storefronts and parking spaces than a separate approach to parking on each parcel. A long-term public vision combined with coordinated private investment to create a classic win-win situation.



*#3: At the main intersection, a corner gas station with the pumps out front was removed for a landscaped parking area.*



*#4: This new one-way connection to Garden Street has helped make businesses in that previously dead-end area of the Village Center more successful.*

### **Showing the Change You Want**

A number of Dutchess County communities have worked on more specific illustrative plans for priority growth centers. For example, LaGrange adopted a [Town Center Illustrative Plan](#) as part of its Comprehensive Plan in 2004, updated its zoning to match, and is now reviewing a village-scale, mixed-use development proposal that appears to be consistent with the original plan.

These and other recent case studies confirm that going well beyond generalized planning maps to show specific locations and types of preferred development attracts new investment in the right places, reduces confrontation in the review process, and promotes positive, smart growth contributions to the community.



*#5: An inefficient parking lot layout divided between two owners was redesigned to create more shared parking spaces, along with three new storefronts and second-story apartments.*



*#6: Cooperation among three adjacent property owners, all with redevelopment projects, created a new rear lane connection to the municipal lot.*

## **More Information**

[Priority Growth Areas Greenway Guide](#) (from Greenway Connections)  
[Greenway Connections](#)  
[Town of Rhinebeck Design Standards](#)

[Village of Rhinebeck 1993 Village Center Plan](#)  
[LaGrange Town Center Illustrative Plan](#)

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