



Chapter 5

A Livable Community

Vision for a Livable Community

St. Louis Park's land use and development is guided by its vision of creating and maintaining a very "livable community." As a result of Vision 3.0, one of the city's five Strategic Priorities states "St. Louis Park is committed to providing a broad range of housing and neighborhood-oriented development." The city's vision for land use and development is focused on creating livable neighborhoods with a variety of housing choices and access to neighborhood-oriented businesses, services, recreation and gathering spaces. The community's ten Livable Community Principles embrace the best design practices from the past and the present for creating a complete and connected community that integrates housing, schools, shops, workplaces, parks, and civic facilities essential to the daily life of the community.

St. Louis Park's Livable Community Principles consist of:

1. Walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods
2. Life-cycle housing choices
3. Higher density, mixed-use development
4. Human scale development
5. Transit-oriented development
6. Multi-modal streets and pathways
7. Preserved and enhanced natural environment
8. Attractive and convenient public gathering places
9. Public art, heritage, and culture
10. Unique community and neighborhood identity

To achieve St. Louis Park's Vision 3.0 and Livable Community Principles, the land use plan provides guidance for the community's desired land use patterns, mix of uses, density, site/building design, and neighborhood planning. The Livable Community Principles are intended to provide guidance at multiple geographic scales—community, neighborhood, street, block front, and individual parcel—for future redevelopment, infill development, and public infrastructure reinvestment.

Although many redevelopment parcels and adjacent street patterns may not be readily conducive to Livable Community design, there is a need to find ways to adapt these principles without compromising their general intent. Redevelopment and infill development must look beyond the boundaries of the project and consider how pedestrians, local residents, and nearby workers are affected. All development adds to and fits within the larger context of the block front, street, neighborhood, and community.



Walkable, Mixed-Use Neighborhoods

The most important aspect of an ideal walkable neighborhood is that it provides convenient connections. People should be able to easily and safely connect to parks, shopping, services, food, and other amenities within their own neighborhood or nearby. Neighborhoods should be small enough so that services are within a five-minute walk (1/4 mile). Neighborhoods should have identifiable edges, a focal point, and public gathering spaces. Housing should be located with convenient access to neighborhood shops, parks, transit, pedestrian and bike paths, and public open spaces.

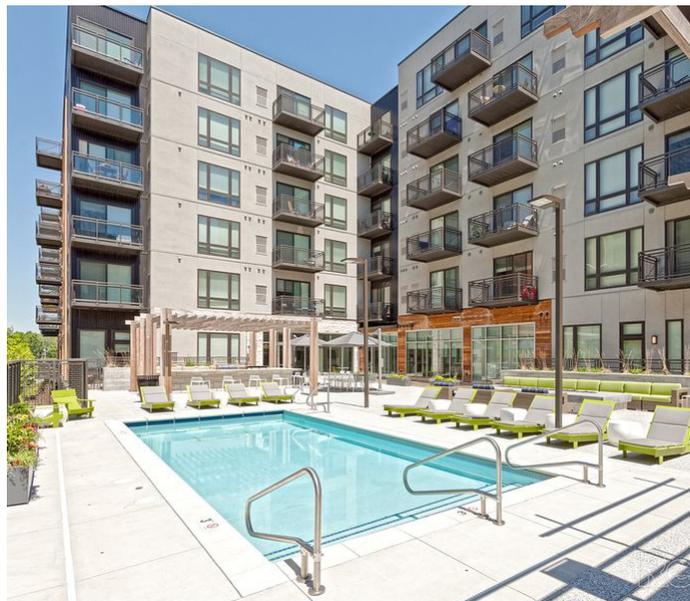
Ideally, neighborhoods consist of a network of interconnected streets rather than dead-end streets, which limit neighborhood connections by reducing social contact among neighbors and forcing all traffic onto arterial streets. Residents may be forced to travel unnecessarily long distances or drive to reach close destinations. Interconnected streets provide multiple choices to travel between two points, and distribute traffic without loading most traffic onto one or two main streets. Residents also come to know, interact with, and identify with their neighborhood and neighbors by way of these connected street patterns.

Factors that determine whether design is pedestrian-oriented include pedestrian safety, distance between home and required services, orientation and scale of buildings, and aesthetics. Pedestrian-oriented design encourages some frequently needed uses to be located within neighborhoods. Encouraging pedestrian activity actually increases safety in neighborhoods, since the presence of people deters crime. Pedestrian needs and destinations change depending upon age. Connecting neighborhoods to parks, schools, recreation, retail, services, and regional systems all need consideration.

Life-Cycle Housing Choices

St. Louis Park's reputation as a desirable community to live in means existing residents want to stay and new residents are attracted to moving to the city. Both existing and new residents are interested in the availability of housing choices that fit where they are in their household's life-cycle. The city's Vision 3.0 process identified affordable housing as an important community value and that affordable housing means different things to different people. Housing choices are different based on where a household is in its life-cycle, e.g. first-time home buyers, current income level, increasing household size, and empty nesters/seniors. One of the Vision 3.0 recommendations is to "Develop Creative Housing Solutions" that address households' lifecycle and affordability needs. As a result, one of the city's five 2018 Strategic Priorities states: "St. Louis Park is committed to providing a broad range of housing and neighborhood-oriented development." This means that the city will encourage the provision of housing choices to meet the needs of its residents through all stages of life.

Examples of households' different life-cycles and housing needs include first-time buyers looking for single-family homes in St. Louis Park that are affordable compared to similar and potentially newer homes in other communities. Empty nesters trading single-family detached housing for condominiums, townhouses or some other form of housing where maintenance is low. Older people often again desire to rent. Other elderly housing incorporates such types of housing as assisted living. Neighborhoods ought to encourage interaction between people of all ages, cultures, and socioeconomic status. A range of housing choices allows people to stay within a neighborhood throughout their life cycles. This provides stability to the neighborhood and to the larger community. When housing types are mixed within neighborhoods, even closer life-long ties to the community can be achieved.



Higher Density, Mixed-Use Development

Historically, commercial development in the city contained buildings oriented toward the street with upper story office and residential uses. Zoning Ordinances adopted in the 1950s outlawed new mixed use buildings, requiring instead a separation of uses for new construction. This development pattern, although intended to increase the quiet enjoyment of residential areas, also had the unintended result of single story strip commercial development with large parking lots abutting the street and single story warehouse retail surrounded by parking lots. Overcoming this development pattern will take considerable time. Improving pedestrian access to these areas in the meantime will require considerable effort. New commercial developments typically follow suburban development patterns because these have been accepted by commercial users and financing organizations. One important challenge facing supporters of this kind of development will be to convince institutions to support these development and community principles.

Mixed-use development means two or more uses are contained within the same building. Residential mixed-use also means mixed-income housing, mixed types of housing on the same block, and higher density development. Sometimes there is a perception that high density means congested streets. In fact, high density often results in reduced automobile trips, because higher densities can support local retail and services as well as transit, all of which can reduce automobile trips.

Transit Oriented Development

Funds for building and expanding highways are not keeping up with congestion, and expanding highway capacity generally increases demand. Effective public transit is an alternative to the automobile which is more sustainable both in long term infrastructure costs and energy conservation. Design for and around transit is very important to the long-term viability of any community.

Land use plays an important role when considering transit. As many activities as possible should be located within easy walking distance of transit stops. This includes jobs, shopping, and services, and housing.

Ideally, every neighborhood would have a transit stop to enable residents' connection to the wider community without being dependent on an automobile. Many neighborhoods have low population and job densities, which limit the feasibility of either economically prudent or convenient transit service. Therefore, economically efficient transit must provide a balance between serving a wide area and providing frequent service.



Human-Scale Development

Great buildings and site design not only serve the private enterprise for which they are constructed, they also positively contribute to the character of a community and can find a place in the heart of the people who live there. There are certain design characteristics that contribute to creating great buildings:

- » Commercial buildings should be sized in proportion to the width of the street at a minimum ratio of 1:4 building height to street width. Low commercial buildings do a poor job of defining streets. If a road is too wide, cars drive too fast. Commercial buildings should be at least two stories high.

- » Buildings should have a human scale. Taller buildings may be brought into human scale by creating intimate details on the first floor and setting back upper stories.
- » Buildings should be required to be built to a fixed line instead of a minimum commercial building setback.
- » Windows are required on all sides of a building. This improves the appearance of buildings and allows more light from the building to light the adjacent sidewalks.
- » Buildings require detail and adornment.
- » Buildings should reflect local materials and climate. Buildings which respond to environmental conditions such as light and weather are more efficient and sustainable.
- » Buildings should be built of lasting and quality materials.
- » Building siding applications, window proportions, porch dimensions, entrances, roof pitches should meet material and design requirements.

Human scale development allows people to connect with one another. Sidewalks of ample size with street trees and pedestrian lighting allow people to move freely throughout a neighborhood. Exterior architectural elements such as porches and balconies invite interaction with passers-by. Windows that open to the street allow observation, increasing safety. Meeting places such as parks and coffee shops reinforce interaction. Fences, gates, low walls, gardens, steps, front porches, and stoops are all transitional elements allowing connections.

Human scale development is achieved when parking is accommodated on the street, to the rear of buildings, or in parking structures.

Multi-Modal Streets and Pathways

Streets are part of the public realm and define the community by street width, landscaping, architectural edges, street lights, street furniture, etc. Streets also serve as neighborhood edges and define blocks. As connectors, streets must serve both local needs and those of people passing through and must serve vehicles as well as pedestrians. Some separation is desirable between pedestrian and vehicles, and this buffer can be achieved through means such as allowing on-street parking and landscaping features.

Many streets were originally designed primarily to move automobile traffic smoothly. In addition, many areas of the city were originally developed without sidewalks. Highway construction and road expansions have limited neighborhood-to-neighborhood accessibility, and in some cases, safe pedestrian crossings of major streets and safe access to desirable community destinations are scarce.

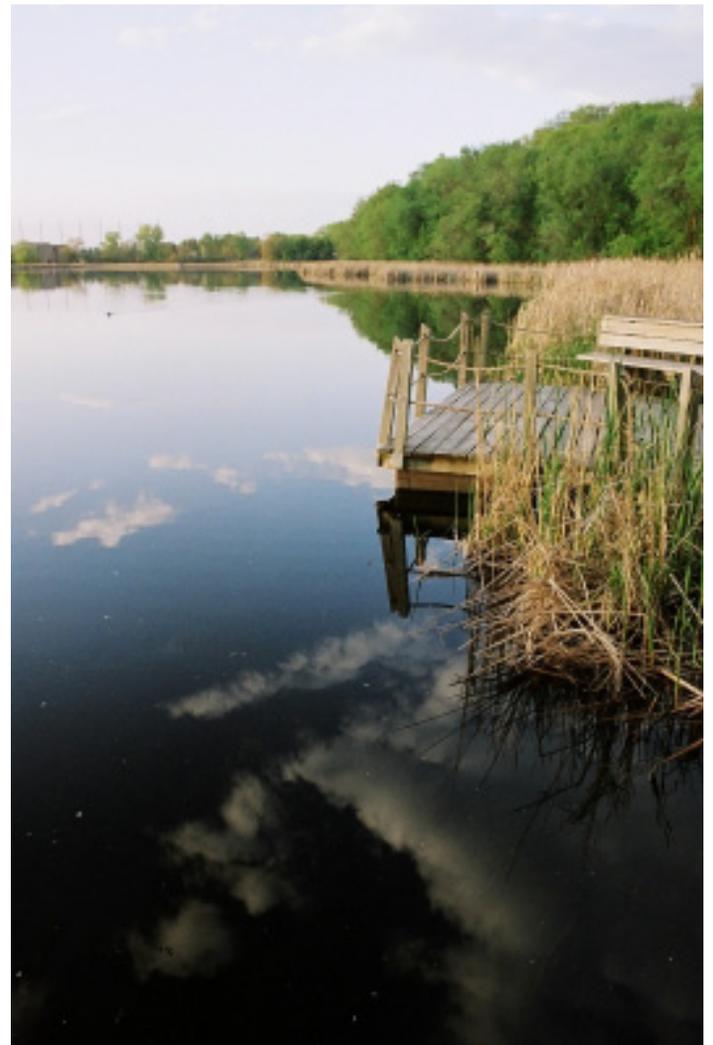
The role of streets to define neighborhood edges, allow safe pedestrian and bike movement, and provide for local needs will need to assert a greater importance in the future. Sidewalks separated from car traffic by landscaped boulevards or parked cars increases pedestrian safety. Pedestrian-oriented street design also means interesting, safe, and easy pedestrian movement within a community.

Consideration must also be given to barriers to pedestrian activity, such as busy streets, highways, and railroad tracks.

- » New subdivisions and large infill developments should incorporate building, block, lot, and street designs that support Livable Communities principles.
- » One asset of older urban design which was eliminated in newer suburban design is the alley. Alleys serve a utility function, i.e. vehicle parking, garbage removal, and utility lines, thereby leaving streets along property frontages to be more aesthetically pleasing, functional, and supportive of community interactions.
- » Commercial buildings should be built to a fixed line consistent with the adjacent street frontage, rather than built with a minimum setback requirement or with on-site parking between the building and the street.
- » The needs of pedestrians, bicycles, and transit must be considered in the mobility network, as well as the siting and orientation of buildings adjacent to the public realm. The needs of automobiles, truck, loading and service areas must also be considered, but negative impacts upon other modes and the public realm should be minimized. Adding sidewalks and bike lanes on streets where none exist can be challenging for neighborhood residents in terms of existing vegetation, costs, and maintenance expectations but should be balanced with the broader community needs for a strong mobility network.

Preserved and Enhanced Natural Environment

The city seeks to preserve and enhance the integrity of the natural resources within the community and each neighborhood. Natural resources include lakes, ponds, creeks, other drainageways, wetlands, floodplains, steep slopes, trees, and vegetation. A livable community strives for a well-designed balance between nature and development to preserve natural resources, protect waterways from pollution and erosion, reduce air pollution, create aesthetic and recreational amenities, and protect property values. Preservation and enhancement of the community's unique natural features also serves a source of community and neighborhood identity. For St. Louis Park, Minnehaha Creek, lakes, wetlands, and remaining wooded areas are the most significant natural features.



Attractive and Convenient Public Gathering Places

Public gathering places are a primary focus of Livable Community design, as well as a value identified in the city's Visioning process. Public gathering places are defined as both public (parks, plazas, civic facilities, schools, libraries) and private spaces (religious facilities, cafes, entertainment venues, etc.) that provide opportunities for public gathering. Such places provide opportunities for social connections and also connect people to jobs, shopping, entertainment, recreation, and transit. Public gathering places can be focused at community and neighborhood centers or dispersed within neighborhoods and are the fabric that holds neighborhoods together as a community.

In the 1970s when large quantities of multi-family housing were constructed, a lack of park land was identified as a community issue. City codes did not require park dedication unless the land involved was already designated on the Comprehensive Plan as park. Rather than requiring public park land dedication for all multi-family development, the city codes were amended to require privately designed outdoor recreation spaces for these developments in addition to collecting park and trail dedication fees (cash in-lieu-of-land) to improve the city park system.

Neighborhoods are also enhanced when a proper transition separates or transitions the spaces between the public realm and neighborhood dwellings. Fences, gates, low walls, gardens, steps, front porches, stoops, stairs, and landscaping are all elements that aid the transition from public to private space.

Public Art, Heritage, and Culture

Public art enhances community pride and the civic prominence of important public places. It includes outdoor sculpture, fountains, gardens, and building decoration. Public art also may include unique design in street furniture and transit shelters.

Historic buildings, landmarks, and artifacts link the past, the present and the future and can provide meaning and context to the life of the community.

Cultural activities provide residents with diverse backgrounds (ethnic, religious, etc.) and interests with opportunities to celebrate and share their cultures, increasing the sense of belonging to all community members and increasing awareness of the cultural beliefs and values of other people in the community.



Unique Community and Neighborhood Identity

St. Louis Park's unique history, community development, diversity of neighborhoods, and innovative community planning enable the city to maintain and enhance its unique identity and sense of place. The Park Commons "town center" development was primarily the result of the community's desire for having a vibrant downtown in the community and strengthening the community's sense of identity.

Traditionally, neighborhoods have functioned as important social networks that energize and stabilize the community. Neighborhoods can provide support for individuals and families and a source of friendship and companionship. St. Louis Park has 35 neighborhoods, which are the backbone of the community's unique identity, and many of them have active neighborhood organizations.

Optimal neighborhood size is a function of how far a person would be willing to travel as a pedestrian without using some other mode of transportation. This distance is typically about 1/4 mile, or a five-minute walk. Optimum neighborhood size is based upon this "willing to walk" distance. The community is committed to neighborhood planning as a means to enhance the livability of each neighborhood and strengthen the unique identity of each neighborhood.