

## **APPENDIX G: “ABOUT COMMUNITY CHARACTER”**

[excerpts from: *Rural by Design*, Randall Arendt, American Planning Assoc., 1994]

While “maintaining Kensington’s rural character” is a stated priority of Town residents, defining the most important elements that contribute to community character is not always straightforward. Included here are excerpts from the book *Rural by Design*, which may be used as starting points for additional community-wide analysis and planning activities.

### ***Rediscovering Traditional Townscape Elements***

“[To help define local character], interested professionals, local officials, and residents could conduct their own survey and analysis to obtain greater insight into town structure and design. For example, the following exercises might be conducted in a small but diverse section of an older, more traditional part of town:

1. Listing all the different land uses in a three-block area (including non-conforming uses), with particular reference to those that create convenience and/or annoyance to immediate neighbors.
2. Describing the various sizes and types of residential buildings...
3. Measuring the distance relationships between housefronts (or porchfronts) and the sidewalk and the street, the width of the street pavement, the distance between opposing house/porchfronts, and the distance between houses on the same side of the street.

...Residents concerned about the inappropriate suburban layout and design of new subdivisions proposed on the outskirts of the Village of Honeoye Falls, New York (in the Finger Lakes region), performed exercise three above....

When these figures were compared with the minimum standards for lots, building setbacks, and street construction contained in their official subdivision and zoning regulations, it became clear why recent residential subdivision development in their village looked like it had been airlifted in from Long Island: the standards...were grounded firmly in the principles of suburban sprawl.

The immediate result of this volunteer effort was a temporary moratorium and adoption of new village-scaled design criteria for new subdivisions.” (pg. 9)

### ***Defining ‘Traditional Character’***

“...the composite qualities that comprise ‘traditional character’ should be defined locally, through an examination of building materials, architectural styles, front setbacks, street cross-sections, landscaping elements (including fences, hedges and walls), and formal and informal open spaces.” (pg. 118)

### ***Community Image Preference Surveys***

“Planners have for decades relied upon surveys to better understand what type of change local residents would prefer to see in their towns, given the fact that some magnitude of change is inevitable. This has often taken the form of a written survey...

Although survey techniques can provide valuable information unobtainable in any other manner, they provide no solid basis for evaluating the one element of new development of concern to all: its physical appearance, and the way it relates to the existing town and surrounding landscapes.

To address this imbalance...[some towns] employ a visual preference survey ‘as a technique to facilitate citizen participation in the process of determining the desired spatial and visual features of both current and future development within a community’ (Nelessen, 1989). Similar approaches had previously been used to document how people perceive and value various types of natural landscapes.... In a demonstration study, ... 240 color slides were projected onto a large screen in the local school during two sessions attended by 264 adult participants. Respondents were asked to record their reaction to each of the images on a computer form, rating each on a scale of +10 to -10.

The results were tabulated and published in a format useful to town officials looking for guidance in proposing future land-use regulations....

Among the *lowest* preference ratings found were those for classic ‘cookie-cutter’ subdivisions, apartment or condo complexes, and highway strip development and shopping plazas with large front parking lots. Not surprisingly, the most *highly* rated images were those of the existing local countryside: farm fields, narrow rural roads, woodlots, ponds, and streams. Together, these parts of the results indicated a clear preference for preserving open space and avoiding conventional suburban sprawl...” (pg. 28)

### ***Visual Techniques to Increase Awareness***

“The impact of zoning policies on large parcels can also be accomplished with hand-drawn ‘birds-eye’ sketches....this older technique has its own distinct advantages, because people sometimes react more positively to highly realistic sketches (which are obviously hypothetical) than they do to the ‘high-tech’ photographic imagery possible on today’s equipment (which is occasionally perceived to be ‘slick’ and manipulative).” (p.15) An example follows.

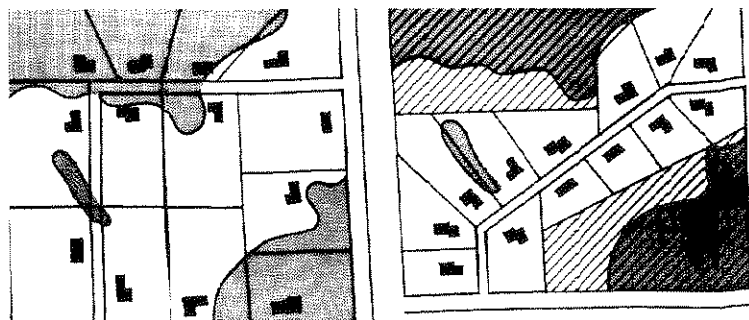


Figure 1: Alternative layouts for conventional and open-space subdivision design.