

PART I :: ISSUE

For the past 60 years, the strip corridor has been a predominant model of development. Across the United States, hundreds of thousands of miles of highways have accumulated millions of square feet of commercial property. Almost all of it looks the same: Long strip malls with one or more “anchors” and multiple smaller tenants and out-parcels; a primary frontage dominated by a sea of unshaded, unadorned parking; a lack of physical or social connection to adjacent land uses; and all too frequently, a high number of vacant storefronts.

The vacancies occur because the strip corridor is not a “sustainable” model for growth. It functions because the malls are built to be ‘disposable’. Rather than maintain a long-term tenant base, the first generation shops move out as the center ages, relocating to a newer, shinier mall down the road. These stores are backfilled with progressively lower-rent tenants, and the result is that older malls begin to fall into decay and are eventually left behind as under-performing or empty blights on their immediate surroundings.

The US-280 corridor in Phenix City, AL is a case-study in the struggling strip archetype. While some centers remain vibrant, a majority struggle with occupancy and aesthetics. Beyond the larger centers, smaller out-parcel and single-lot development fills in the gaps, and in many cases is healthier than their mall neighbors. The age is apparent on many of these buildings, and it contributes to an overall shabby appearance for the corridor. In addition, the combination of a concentration of commercial land uses with a lack of inter-parcel connectivity, secondary access and 280’s function as a “destination cut-through” have made traffic conditions untenable.

However, the highway does have assets, and these assets can be leveraged to support positive future development. For one, while congestion can be problematic, high traffic counts themselves are boons for retailers. They represent customers, and there is no substitute for their proximity. Secondly, the large, under-performing parcels tend to be more amenable to redevelopment, especially in a more innovative and healthier format.

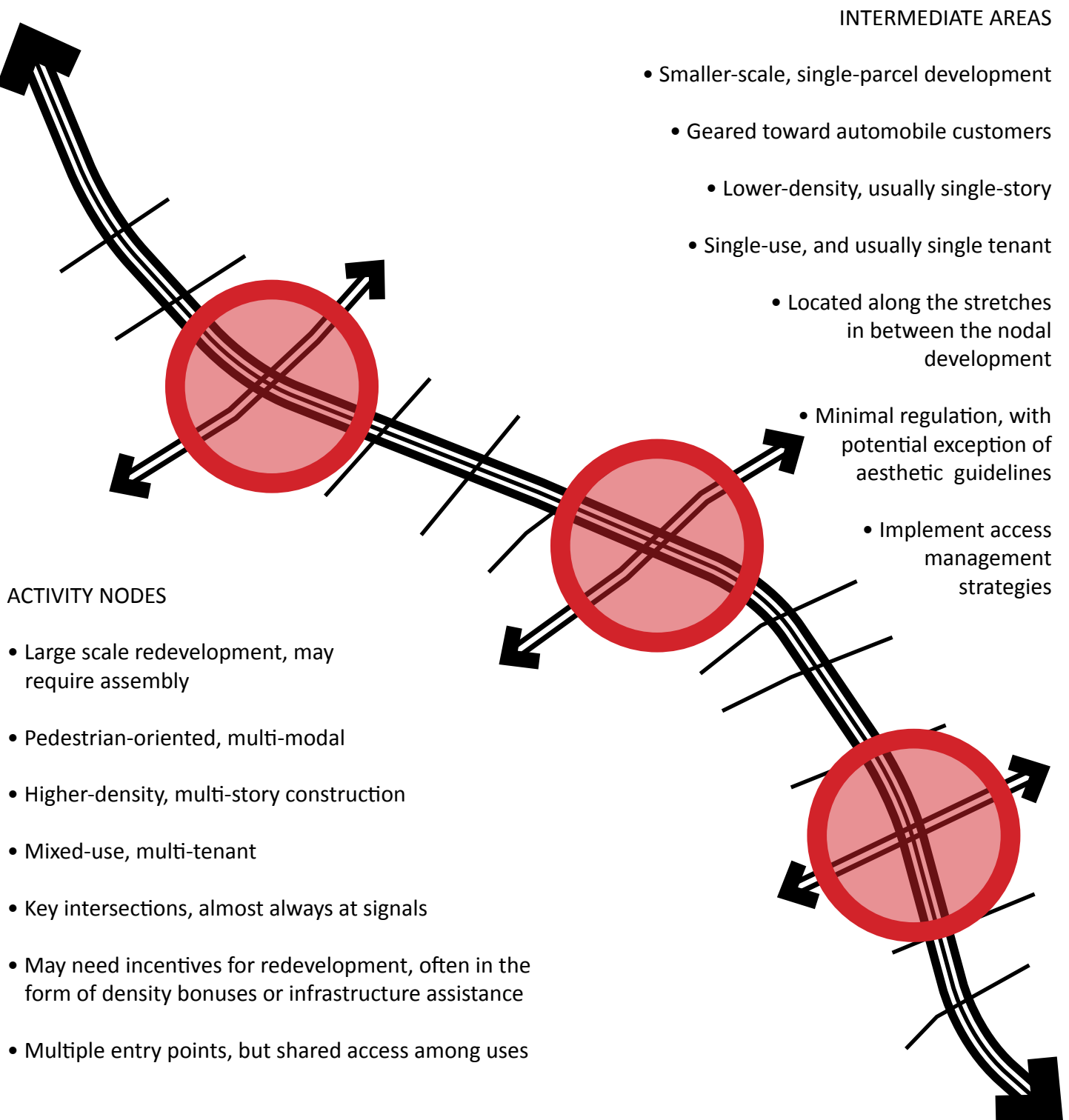
What remains to codify and implement the necessary policies to encourage more desirable, more market-friendly, more sustainable growth along the US-280 corridor...



PART II :: APPROACH

Corridor redevelopment along US-280 needs to begin with the acknowledgement that there are two distinct conditions: Nodal and Intermediate. Nodal development is focused on and around major intersections, and is usually marked by larger parcels and signaled access. The intermediate development occurs in the spaces “in between” these nodes, and may have smaller single-parcel development and stand-alone retailers.

It is important to recognize that both formats are viable, and even complimentary, and that both conditions will need some level of support from the City. However, it is the nodal development that will require more incentive and recruitment by the local decision-makers.



PART III :: STRATEGIES

When implementing the approach to redevelopment, there are a number of principles they may be applied, even to a variety of strategies. In terms of approaches to Nodal Development:

1. **Create a sense of place.** Successful developments aren't merely collections of shops and stores; they cultivate a distinct identity. New development should employ multiple strategies - the use of iconic elements; the termination of views with landmarks; creating a sense of arrival; the inclusion of small open space features (fountains, islands, traffic circles, plazas, gazebos, etc.) at strategic points - to give a nodal development a character of its own.
2. **Enhance walkability.** Creating a destination means creating a place where people can patronize multiple establishments in one stop. Small block sizes are one step, but walkability is also improved with wide, comfortable sidewalks; clear crossings; a pleasant environment; and engaging storefronts.
3. **Develop a mix of uses.** Attractive and sustainable destinations offer multiple reasons to go there. By locating a variety of uses within close proximity to one another, a more efficient model is created for parking, traffic and pedestrian accessibility.
4. **Moderate block sizes.** Break up larger existing parcels with new, clearly-defined internal roads. This creates a more pedestrian-friendly grid pattern of streets, and enhances the associated "sense of place" in a development. It can be achieved by setting maximum block sizes, and reviewing site-specific plans. Depending on the specific property and the associated deal, the roads may be private or public (though the latter is preferred).
5. **Vary the massing and style of buildings.** By changing the size and detail of the elements that make up the development, it can avoid the long monotonous architecture of the classic strip center. The design should have a consistent unifying style, but not be completely uniform in appearance.

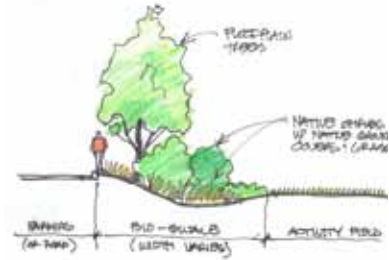
There are some principles that are applicable to both Nodal and Intermediate development types:

1. **Encourage Inter-parcel connectivity.** In concert with access-management efforts, ensure that individual lots are accessible from adjacent parcels, not just from the primary street. This can be accommodated in a variety of formats, including shared drives, frontage/backage roads. This reduces traffic on the primary corridor and improves economic viability/



sustainability by improving access.

2. **Update environmental practices.** Long-term investment and sustainability can be encouraged and assisted by requiring a more progressive approach to environmental development. This can range from the “seen” - using trees and landscaping to make a more humane place; “amenitizing” detention and retention areas - to the “unseen” - handing runoff via bio-swales and natural filtration fields; creating opportunities for shared stormwater handling.



5. **Reduce the visual impact of parking.** Parking is necessary, but it is rarely attractive. In Nodal developments, the overall parking demand should be reduced. This can be achieved by increasing office/service uses, “pruning” under-performing retail, and encouraging shared parking. Buildings can be distributed to break up large lots into smaller lots, and additional parking can be located on the new street grid. In Intermediate development, strategies may also include provisions for shared parking, as well as approaches as simple as improving landscaping standards and visual screening.



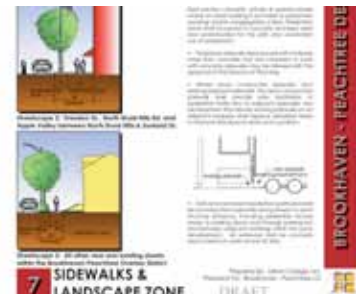
To support many of these broader goals, the City should consider the adoption of associated Regulatory Enhancements:

1. **Reduce parking requirements.** Consider using parking maximums in addition to minimums, and in some cases, don't have minimums at all. Let the market set the comfort level.



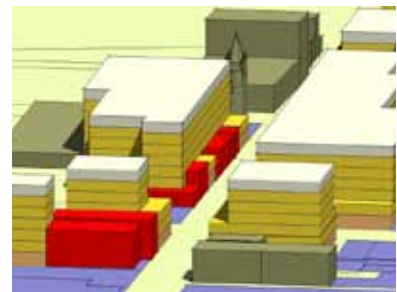
2. Include considerations for **shared or ganged parking** calculations.

3. **Require inter-parcel connectivity** among adjacent uses, in coordination with access management strategies.



4. **Develop landscape / sidewalk requirements** for new and redeveloping sites. These may include mandates for trees in parking lots (maximum run of spaces), sidewalk location and widths, pedestrian amenities, etc.

5. **Allow for more variety of uses.** Many outdated zoning codes are overly restrictive on the number and types of uses that may be developed in one location. Code should be updated to allow for a more sustainable mix of uses within or among adjacent parcels.



6. **Restrict out-parcel developments.** Among Nodal developments, these sorts of stand-alone buildings discourage walking and make shared parking less practical. To help discourage out-parcels (in Nodal developments), the location

of parking (relative to a building) may be limited to one or two sides of the building itself.

6. **Create opportunities for shared service areas.** Avoid having every small development have to have its own dumpster; at the very least, reduce size requirements for smaller developments.
7. **Be creative with financing.** To attract businesses in any economy, let alone during a downturn, the City should find ways to offset increased development costs associated with development standards. This may include, but not be limited to, direct capital outlays, reduction or elimination of impact fees, shared infrastructure costs, etc.

PART IV :: TEST MODELS

In order to better illustrate the principles outlined in the earlier sections, this report includes a digital “test model”. This model was used to examine potential physical implications of implementing new policies for redevelopment. In this case, two scenarios were created; one in which the redevelopment focus was on commercial program, and one that was oriented more toward “place-making” and livability. In both cases, the goal was to look at how a target site (in this case, the Piggly-Wiggly center on US-280) might be reconfigured under more sustainable and economically-feasible principles. The existing site is shown below:



Lack of connections to adjacent neighborhoods increases traffic on primary roads

Distant setback from highway offers poor exposure, particularly for smaller tenants

Numerous uncoordinated curb cuts interfere with traffic flow on frontage road

Aging strip centers lack a sense of place that differentiates them from one another

Lack of connectivity among fronting parcels puts unnecessary traffic on frontage roads

“Sea of parking” is a visual deterrent when empty, reinforcing the “dead” appearance

Lack of sidewalks and accommodations for bicycles reinforce the auto-orientation

Model One :: Commercial Scenario

This scenario focuses on a moderate redevelopment of the commercial property only, with the potential to incent infill and rehab of the adjacent single-family neighborhoods. Some of the traits of this approach are illustrated in the digital simulation below:



Model Two :: "Livability" Scenario

This scenario is slightly more transformative than the first model, with more variation in program, more options in housing, and the introduction of potential housing to the main "village" area. An example of how this approach might take shape:



Well-connected street grid reinforces the walkable component of this approach

A mix of uses surrounding the park ensures that the area is always active and safe

A civic/institutional use helps frame the park and can encourage higher density residential development

Interparcel connectivity with existing adjacent commercial sites

Larger, active greenspace attracts and supports increased housing

Multi-family development is attracted by and supports a "town center"

Bio-retention areas serve the commercial development

Townhomes can be built out in an alternate phase, but should help "frame" the park

Depending on market conditions, the "village" could support upper-story lofts or offices

Ground-floor retail helps create an engaging street environment

Alternative :: High-Impact Scenario

This scenario would require significantly more municipal involvement than in either of the modeled options. It is likely that this would reflect less of a “standard operating procedure” and would more feasible as some sort of City-backed pilot project, particularly in terms of the infrastructural investment required. The diagram below illustrates these implications:

