

Chapter 7: Community Atmosphere

No, this section is not more on air quality, but the atmosphere of a neighborhood, a main street, a town, a valley, and a host of other locales people regard as special. At times “atmosphere” can be a difficult quality to define. For example, many small town residents cherish the atmosphere of their locale. But these same residents may have difficulty saying by how much the area could grow before losing its small town atmosphere. If instead residents are asked what it is about the town they like then you’ll hear answers such as: friendly people, little traffic congestion, frequently meet friends and other acquaintances while shopping, good service and friendly staff at local businesses, low taxes, and so forth.

Neighborhood atmosphere is important of course, not just in a small town. Neighborhoods within a large city can have their own unique atmosphere. Some people value neighborhoods that are close to restaurants, theaters, museums, or other attractions. Other neighborhoods may have an atmosphere attributable more to those who live there than what’s nearby, such as blocks where most residents are artists or work at a nearby hospital. Other neighborhoods are dominated by people from a particular ethnic, cultural or religious background. In neighborhoods of moderately priced homes young families may dominate. In the evening you’ll see lots of people out with strollers or walking older kids to a tot lot.

It’s not just residential areas which have a unique atmosphere. A commercial area may possess this quality as well. The best example is a historic main street. For many towns, main street was the primary commercial area for much of the town’s history. Local government was located in a town hall and a courthouse situated on main street. Most of the doctors, lawyers, accountants and other professionals had their offices on main street. And main street was where people went to shop and dine.

Preserving the atmosphere of a place in the face of rapid growth can be quite challenging. Building a shopping center or big box store on the outskirts of town may draw away many of those who used to shop on main street. The main street merchants must then adjust the goods and services they offer in hopes of filling niches missed by the new competitors.

While preserving atmosphere may be challenging, its not impossible. In fact you can find lots of success stories on websites such as the National Main Street Center of the National Trust for Historic Preservation: <http://www.mainstreet.org/>.

Preserving the atmosphere of a neighborhood, a small town, or any other place is a matter of shaping growth management policies and laws so building occurs at a pace and in a manner conducive to the atmosphere desired by local residents. The first step is to clearly define what it is that creates the atmosphere residents cherish, which is best done by talking directly with residents either through door-to-door or phone surveys, focus groups, or other processes such as the charrettes described in Part III. From these interactions one might learn that the key element of neighborhood atmosphere

is quiet and safe streets. If this is the case then traffic calming and other measures presented in the chapter on traffic may be sufficient to preserve neighborhood atmosphere. While there may not be much one can do to ensure that small town residents stay friendly, the growth management measurements covered in Part II could increase the likelihood of managing the rate of population increase along with the design and layout of new construction.