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BY BIKE OR BY FOOT

*Offsetting traffic issues with
open space connections*



Gas is not 95 cents a gallon, parking is not free and it is definitely harder to beat the rush hour traffic these days.

It is easy to look at these statements and get discouraged about our downtowns and boroughs across the state. Higher gas prices can translate to reduced visits to our downtowns which affects the economic vitality of any community. Parking issues can have a similar effect on downtown. Whether it is not enough parking, problems with meter enforcement or poorly identified and located parking areas, all these parking issues affect the patronage of downtown businesses all too often. Now, add bumper to bumper traffic getting to and leaving your borough, or through your downtown (how many of us share a PennDOT route as our Main Street). Commute times have increased in recent years, and downtown traffic is a constant battle. The combination of these vehicular pressures can crush the sense of place for your community.

In addition to obvious vehicular concerns facing Pennsylvania, there is an ever present and more urgent national emphasis on sustainability, environmentally sensitive design and wellness. It is simply not enough to talk about being better stewards of the environment (a token statement for our profession). We must make efforts to affect this change in our communities. Green design goes beyond the building envelope and into our downtowns in many different forms.

Talk About Pressure!

But, we need not fear these pressures. Remember, with enough force and pressure, even coal can become a diamond.

As designers, we cannot promise a diamond for every community that experiences these issues, but there are sustainable and creative ways to approach these pressures that will afford every community their own



FIGURE 1 Infill development encourages the linkage of corridors within the borough.

chance at a precious stone, diamond or otherwise.

How?

Offset these issues with open space planning and local greenways within our boroughs and downtowns.

Frederick Law Olmstead, the father of modern landscape architecture, most known for his awe inspiring design for Central Park in New York City, had the solution for congestion, traffic, parking and sustainability over a century ago in Boston. The Emerald Necklace is a series of interconnected urban green spaces linked with other park areas to create an open space network spanning more than 1,000 acres throughout downtown Boston. Olmstead used open spaces to link portions of the city via a greenway connection that provided a much needed respite from city living. By using the open space network, Boston residents do not need to fight traffic, change lanes, circle the block looking for parking or worry about where the needle is on the gas gauge. They ride their bike, jog or walk throughout their community without encountering the pressures of traffic and its associates. There are similar urban greenways in Minneapolis, New York, and Nashville.

So here we are, decades later, applying an age old solution to a common issue facing our boroughs and downtowns across the state. Using open space connections to offset, and in some cases alleviate,

traffic issues within your downtown. Consider it a greenway plan for your downtown. As a state, there are countless examples of regional greenway plans (check www.pagreenways.org) where we can draw inspiration. The same principles that apply to the Susquehanna Greenways Plan or the Northwest Greenways Plan (both fine examples of regional planning), apply to your downtown, only scaled down to fit. Greenway plans use paths and trails to connect various historical, environmental, or cultural elements within a region. They promote alternate modes of transportation, resource conservation, and health and wellness. They can also be models of sustainability for your downtown while bolstering your local economy.

Furthermore, PennDOT's Smart Transportation initiatives are an excellent example of statewide support for open space and greenway planning. Their support of safe routes to school, quality of life and increasing vibrant economies through transportation planning is an immediate enabler for smarter planning in our boroughs. Bringing Olmstead's vision into our boroughs is more important now than it ever has been.

How it Applies to Us...

As landscape architects, when we first enter a community to begin the planning process, the first things we analyze are the open spaces.



FIGURE 2 Using the stream as a central component creates a welcoming environment within the community.

- Where are they?
- How big are they?
- How are they used?
- Do they relate to the development of the town?
- Are they accessible from the core downtown?

The absolute next thing we analyze and begin to conceptualize is how to connect all the open spaces, add more spaces and enhance the existing.

- Are there opportunities for new open space?
- Are there underutilized spaces?
- Are there logical connections?

On the surface, this approach seems oddly self-serving, landscape architects looking for ways to add open spaces in town. It is not that simple.

Through our work in downtowns, we understand that the connection of these open spaces provides the alternate routes for the pedestrian, shopper, resident, visitor, bicyclist

and anyone else who uses your community. The extent to which these open spaces exist and are utilized effectively has a direct impact on the perceived sense of traffic congestion and circulation difficulty in your community. The more accessible open space connections are the less dependent your community is on the vehicle. Imagine a community where you park your car once and are able to move freely from destination to destination through open space connections that provide separation from the streets, traffic and congestion.

Now Imagine it's your Community

Odds are you have many of the necessary elements. They just need to be connected, enhanced or maybe just promoted and celebrated a bit more.

- Do you have a stream corridor in town?

- Do you have a linear park or rail trail nearby?
- Does your borough have multiple parks in and around town that could be better connected?

Chances are you answered yes to one of those questions. With those inherent strengths come great opportunities for connections and open space improvements. The same principles and approaches that apply to the regional greenway plans and the urban greenway plans have a place in your borough. Start with the assets already present in your community and connect these elements using open spaces.

One thing you learn very quickly working in Lititz is that a few times a year, the traffic is unbearable (our annual Craft Show and 4th of July Celebration). During these events and at various other times, the presence of a strong open space corridor along Lititz Run (a spring fed tributary to Conestoga Creek) provides an

alternative to driving into town. The corridor is open to pedestrians and bicyclists and traverses our central business district. The 2008 Downtown Master Plan proposes infill development along this corridor to further capitalize on its strength as a connective corridor within our community. (see Figure 1)

While not a borough, the City of Meadville faces similar issues. They have launched a brilliant plan to connect open spaces throughout their community, focusing on the path of Mill Run. Unfortunately, in many locations the stream itself is underground, which led to creatively using open spaces along the corridor to maintain the linkages from the local high school property, through the core of the community to the confluence with French Creek. (see Figure 2)

Alleys in a community can function as open space connections. In Elizabethtown, an enhanced alley served as a much needed connection linking to a large recreational open space and the Conoy Creek corridor. The Elizabethtown Master Plan proposes expanding these existing connections to a new amphitheatre and eventually to the Amtrak station. When complete, visitors by train will be able to make their way from the platform to the downtown entirely separate from the vehicular routes. (see Figure 3)

Parks, alleys, plazas, stream corridors, abandoned rail lines and even well appointed streetscapes are the building blocks of a successfully connected downtown. The means to this connected end is planning and seeing the value in these alternate routes. The time is right for this way of thinking in our communities. It is supported nationally and regionally. What is necessary now is the local support and desire. The movement that began so long ago in Boston is finally finding its way to the boroughs of Pennsylvania. **(B)**

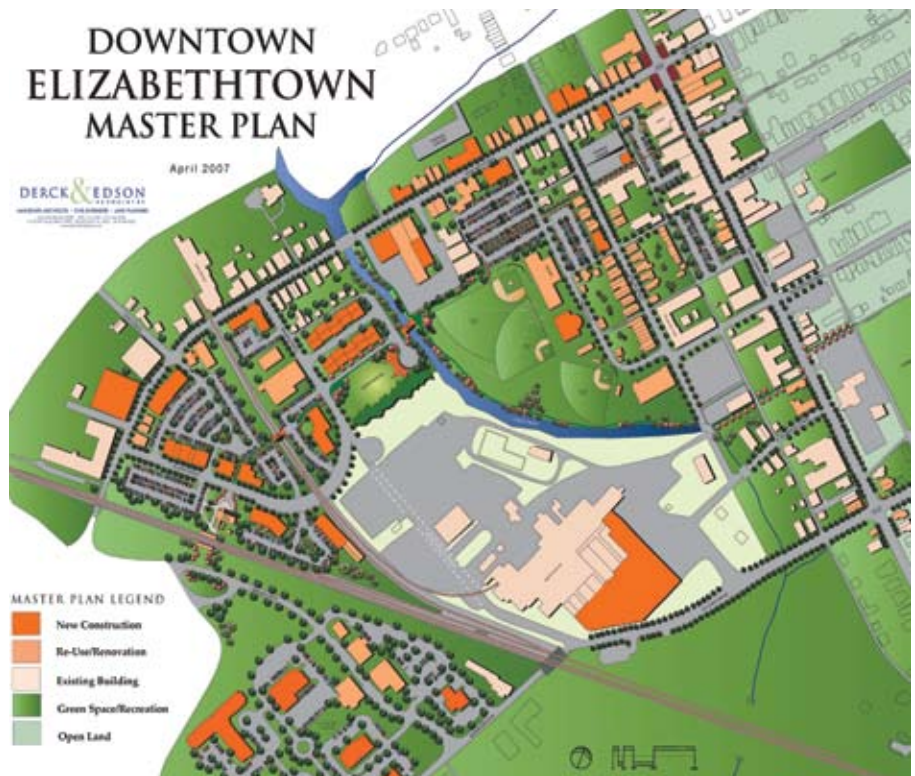


FIGURE 3 The Master Plan proposes linking areas so that multiple modes of transportation can access the downtown.


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