

# Guiding Principles & Techniques for Quality Growth



## The Planning Gap

Hundreds of students graduate from planning, landscape architecture and natural resources programs every year, equipped in some way to help plan the future of our communities. One would think that such students would graduate equipped to help communities develop design programs for communitywide open space systems and corresponding quality development. However, until recently, a design program to develop a comprehensive open space system simply did not exist and so has not been taught. The fields of study have done well articulating methods for recreation master planning, for instance, but these methods fail to encompass a comprehensive view. No program accounts for and considers the multiple values that are associated with open land in a holistic fashion. First an academic oversight and perhaps an unwise bias by the professions to emphasize specialization, the lack of emphasis on the “big picture,” or integrated systems thinking, has proved nationally disastrous, as communities have been unable to appropriately address the various functions and values of their environment and have, in turn, allowed unchecked development to run rampant. Developing a comprehensive, easy-to-use program that accounts for all open space types while planning for anticipated growth has become a national necessity.

## Three Practical Principles for Quality Growth

### 1. Systems Thinking Rules.

Few systems operate independently. Most are a part of larger systems, impacting and depending upon other elements within a larger whole. Spaces within a community – both developed and open – depend upon one another to function properly, so a community planning program must include a consideration of its natural systems. Open space types, functions and values must be identified, understood, and prioritized, and much research has led to a simple means of accounting for all of this. All open lands and their values can easily fit into one of five broad categories: cultural, ecological, developmental, agricultural and recreational. These categories are known by the acronym CEDAR. A valued open space always fits into one of the categories, and many fit into several. For instance, a river corridor may have an ecological function (water quality, wildlife habitat), a recreational use (trail location) and cultural value (viewshed). These categories lend a comprehensive understanding to the resources in our communities and help us piece together an open space system that protects open lands that hold clear value.

If we work toward an open space system that functions properly, it will only enhance the built environment and the daily experience of those living within it. Incorporating CEDAR resources into a community plan makes sense at environmental, planning, engineering, and economic levels.

### 2. First Things First (The Land, That Is).

Conventional planning efforts across the nation consider in almost every case development and associated man-made systems (transportation, water, sewer) first – leaving open space systems and all they contribute to a community highly vulnerable. The cultural, ecological, agricultural and recreational contributions of open space are too valuable to remain an afterthought. Rather, open lands must be considered first in a community planning effort. Open lands, when their values and locations and connections are understood, can become the fully functioning systems they need to be. This approach makes sense from a development perspective as well. When development decisions are informed by an understanding of open land resources, costs can be reduced for developers and municipalities as development is shaped



into less consumptive patterns and guided away from sites that require extensive engineering or are distant from logical sewer and water line locations. This is quality development, and it is a true departure from business as usual. Putting open lands at the forefront of community planning is new to the United States, but it needs to happen if we want to reverse trends toward sprawling growth and unchecked development.

### 3. Bottom Line: It's All a Local Effort.

The planning effort is only successful when local residents share their ideas, express their opinions and become enthusiastic contributors to the planning process. Without citizen authorship, the best planning efforts do not gain the ability to affect change and direct the future of a community or a nation.

Community workshops are a cornerstone of a successful local planning effort. Workshops provide an opportunity for the public to develop a vision for the future of their community and their region. Workshops bring invaluable ideas and opinions to a planning effort, and they also create a sense of unity and support for project goals. In a workshop, through education, discussion, written responses, and hands on activities, residents can articulate how they would like their community to be characterized in the future.

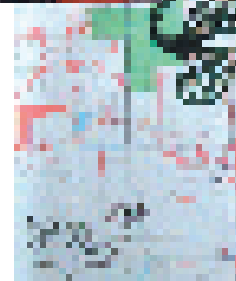
Workshops should incorporate a consideration of comprehensive open lands conservation followed by a discussion of development needs associated with anticipated growth. At a workshop, residents complete a visioning and design process that gives a community a clear picture of the future that residents envision.

Before participants think about the development aspects of land use, participants should first take a look at open lands. Education is paramount to the process. Participants learn basic green space design principles and the CEDAR values associated with different types of open land. Community members then work together at tables outfitted with aerial photos or maps of their community to identify open space resources. They use colored pens to highlight cultural, ecological, agricultural and recreational assets on the photo or map. After identifying valuable open lands, residents work together to link these spaces, creating a green space system for their community.

After creating their green space system, residents are posed with another challenge: to think about the impact that projected population increases will have on their community. After learning about development options and alternatives, including those that conserve land, residents are asked to locate development to accommodate a projected 30-year population increase and are challenged to keep their green space systems in tact. They are given "chips," or placeholders representing a constant acreage but various development types and population capacities. Residents affix the chips to their maps, working to conserve the green spaces they love while accommodating anticipated growth.



*After locating valued open lands, citizens arrange chips like those at the far right to maps (example right and above) to indicate where developments should be located and which type it should be. Some chips represent 1601/4-acre lots, some represent 80 residential lots combined with open space, as in the conservation subdivision chip. Other chips represent large agricultural lots, mixed use areas, etc. Chips can be adapted to reflect a community's development patterns as well as to introduce new, sustainable options.*

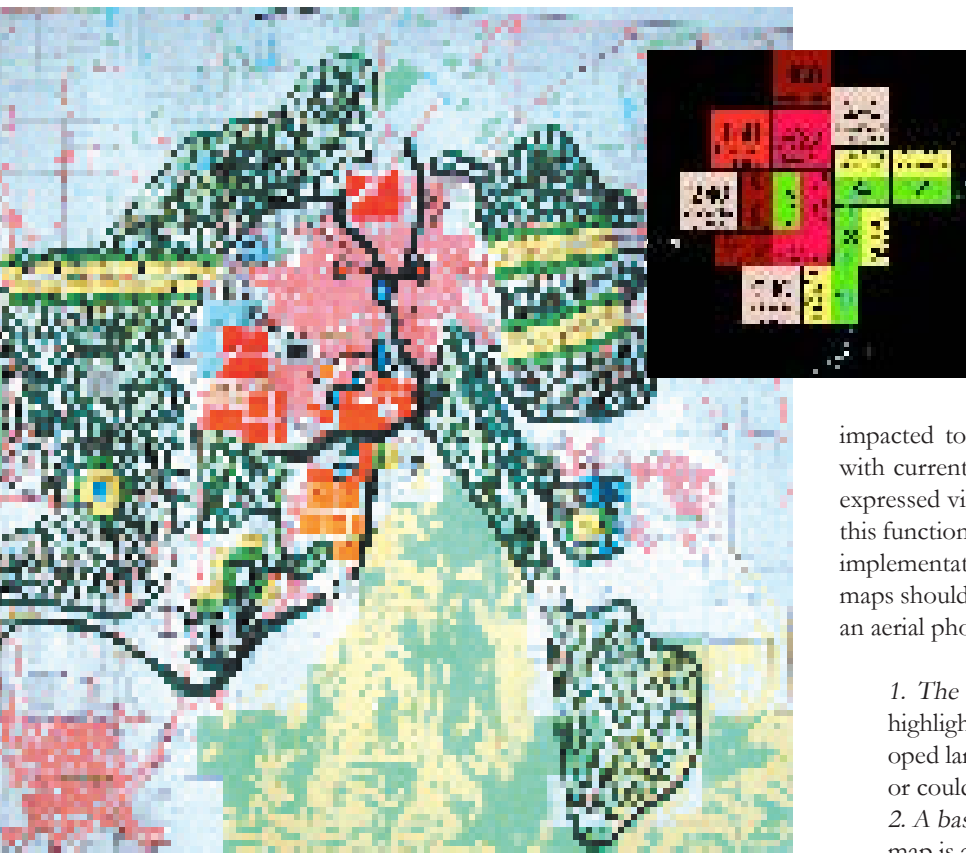


The workshop process is recommended for several reasons:

- It promotes a sense of unity, consensus and public support regarding issues that may be volatile. This consensus provides a foundation for the success of implementation activities.
- It allows a community to chart a course of its own. Residents make their own decisions about open space and development goals in an environment that affords them a fuller understanding of open space systems and allows them to explore and work with the full variety of development options, from traditional development patterns, recent trends and new alternatives.
- In a regional effort, a workshop allows individual communities to reap the rewards of working in a regional context. While participants look at their own communities, they can also contribute to the process of identifying regional goals and resources, all of which can benefit local plans.

### Closing the Planning Gap

CEDAR can be employed at any scale to lend clarity to the open space discussion. When open lands can be clearly identified and located and their values can be understood and prioritized, it becomes possible to develop a comprehensive open space plan, which can then guide development decisions. When open lands are considered first,



the planning emphasis inherently switches to a conservation-oriented discussion, enabling more responsible development planning. Finally, when the public is brought into the planning effort and becomes informed of its options, a community has a much better chance of gaining support for higher quality patterns of growth.

## The Implementation Gap

Review most community comprehensive or general plans and you read descriptions of the future that sound like the return of the Garden of Eden. Colorful language conjures a mental image of beauty, cohesiveness and harmony. Such plans are adopted, and then planners and residents are perplexed about the ugliness cropping up around them, about the sense of loss they feel as treasured spaces succumb to sprawling suburban subdivisions. What is wrong here? The plan or vision is beautiful, but it seems to have no impact.

In most cases, a review of that same community's subdivision and zoning codes provide an explanation, for they usually tell a different story. These codes often allow the kinds of development that may be unwanted, for they lack provisions for open space protection and provide few alternatives, incentives and options for developers that want to be sensitive to a community's sense of place and identity. In fact,

many of these codes actually require "bad" development, encouraging consumptive land use practices and promoting housing options that don't meet residents' needs. The gap, or disconnect between a community's comprehensive plans and its subdivision and zoning regulations, makes implementation of a more sustainable development plan nearly impossible.

## Two Simple Tools for Implementing a Plan

### **Maps: Here We Are, There We Will Be**

Implementation efforts become easier when time is devoted to showcasing how current conditions will be impacted to produce one of two futures: the future as it will look with current planning policies in place, and the future as desired and expressed via a community planning effort and workshop. Maps serve this function beautifully, directing the focus of a planning effort toward implementation from the very beginning of a project. Three simple maps should be developed, and they are most helpful when overlaid on an aerial photograph of the community.

1. *The stop light map.* This map illustrates existing conditions, highlighting permanently protected open space in green, developed lands in red and "swing" areas (areas that could remain open or could be developed) in yellow.
2. *A baseline build out map per current planning documents.* This map is a projection of the future if development and preservation continue in the same manner, relying on current planning documents and regulations. This map projects how build out will occur based on anticipated population growth and existing plans.
3. *A desired future buildout map per community vision.* This map is a projection of the future as envisioned by community members. Like the baseline map, this map accounts for anticipated population growth, but in contrast to the baseline map, this map shows how community members prefer to accommodate growth and protect valued open lands.

These maps give planners visual tools to highlight the gap that usually exists between how a community will look if current trends continue and what community residents want their community to look like. Making this planning disconnect obvious throughout the planning process makes implementation easier. It is possible to see what needs to be changed, and it becomes politically more acceptable to make necessary updates to subdivision and zoning codes.

### **Audits: How to Get Where We Need to Be**

Communities also benefit from the audit process. Like the mapping above, auditing helps focus a planning effort on its eventual goal: implementation of a quality growth plan for a community. The auditing process involves reviewing all of a community's current planning documents for their ability to steer development and preservation



toward a desired future. Two types of audits are helpful:

1. *The general audit.* The general audit is a quick review of community planning documents prior to extensive planning work. Here, planners generate a brief, memo-style document designed to generally summarize the potential need for changes in order to realize planning goals. This audit is simply intended to give community leaders a feel for the types of plan updates that may need to occur down the road.

2. *The specific audit.* The specific audit is a detailed description of the activities necessary if a community wants to close the gap between the future its planning documents will create and the future that is envisioned by residents and community leaders. This review of planning documents highlights specific sections that will need to be updated and suggests language for such changes. This step is critical, for it provides a community with a program that can be adopted and folded directly into existing planning documents.

## Closing the Implementation Gap

Using the mapping and auditing techniques outlined above keeps the focus of a planning effort set on its ultimate goal: implementation. The mapping exercises and general audit allow community residents and leaders to understand early on that some changes will be necessary if their desired future is to come to fruition. By preparing a community for change from the beginning of the process, the actual implementation effort becomes broadly supported, politically acceptable and economical to achieve. The specific audit provides a streamlined package that is ready to adopt, and with its adoption, the disconnect or gap between planning policy and a community's hopes for the future disappears. A community is able to set a course that will bring about the future that residents have envisioned.

Most importantly, this implementation method attacks the core problem – the disconnect – at its source (unlike expensive stand alone land purchase programs, moratoria, or zoning changes). By correcting existing planning documents, a community anticipates and dissolves problems that could otherwise have affected future development and conservation efforts. This method of implementation is less costly than many other alternatives, and it brings clarity to all parties involved in future growth and preservation decisions, from concerned citizens to developers and city staff. For the first time, a community's comprehensive plan and subdivision and zoning ordinances support one another, allowing for a future that is created upon sustainable design principles.