

SUSTAINABLE LAND DEVELOPMENT TODAY – JUNE 2007**MAPLE LAWN**

Maple Lawn, Maryland

Over the past 15 years, “Smart Growth” has been the mantra of an increasingly growing number of politicians and planners. Increased traffic congestions, the disappearance of green space, and the proliferation of sprawling, single-use developments have prompted many counties and municipalities to adopt policies that favor Smart Growth. In many parts of the United States, civic leaders and the local public have led the charge to create developments that limit suburban sprawl. Yet many factors can challenge their quest.

Many of the basic tenets of Smart Growth were brought to the forefront of public discourse by the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) in the mid-1990s, a grass-roots organization of architects, planners, developers, and civic leaders who sought alternatives to post-war, auto-oriented development. The CNU argued for the reconfiguration of sprawling suburbs into communities of walkable neighborhoods, the preservation of natural environments, more pedestrian- and transit-oriented communities, and the creation of compact, higher density developments where housing is within walking distance of coherent mixed-use and retail centers.

Although most agree that these are good principles, it’s not always easy to garner support when it’s planned in someone else’s backyard. Here is how one community, Maple Lawn, Maryland, located between Baltimore and Washington, D.C., worked through tremendous initial opposition in order to plan, design, and construct a Smart Growth development that has everyone involved agreeing that success has been achieved.

What were the strategies that the developer, Greenebaum & Rose Associates, employed to make Maple Lawn a reality?

The perseverance of the development team was crucial. The development faced strong opposition, mainly from neighboring property owners who felt that the proposed development was simply too dense and would negatively impact traffic, schools, quality-of-life, and property values. Howard County, in which Maple Lawn was proposed, did not have a stand-alone zoning or land use board; the county council itself held that role. This meant that elected officials, instead of planning professional, had to be convinced that the development met the criteria for mixed-use zoning, would benefit the county as a whole, and, in fact, would fulfill the county’s 1990 planning policy which discouraged sprawl.

“We knew it would be a process to demonstrate that Maple Lawn would be a good fit for Howard County,” said Stewart Greenebaum, founding partner of Greenebaum & Rose Associates. “But we were prepared to make the time commitment required.”



Retail 1, Business District



Office Building 1, Business District



Cottages



Community Center, Midtown Neighborhood



Community Center, Midtown Neighborhood



Garden Neighborhood



Midtown Neighborhood



Hillside Neighborhood

Eight months of weekly, and sometimes semi-weekly, public hearing were required to obtain the necessary approvals and to gradually persuade these elected officials that Maple Lawn did indeed meet these planning policies.

Education the Howard County Council about the benefits of Smart Growth and the principles of what is referred to as Traditional Neighborhood Development (TND) also proved to be an important strategy. The opposition called for larger lots, less density, and more single-family homes; arguing it would generate less traffic, fewer impacts, and would be more compatible with the surroundings. Their intent was to slow the development or, better yet, reduce the development program significantly. The developer cited numerous environmental organizations, such as the Sierra Club and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, that supported TND principles, higher densities and mixed-use as good Smart Growth policy. The design team offered several examples of built TNDs, highlighting the many economic, social, and environmental benefits of compact, walkable, mixed-use development. In spite of intense oppositions and the political nature of the process, few compromises were made, the benefits were understood, and the master plan was approved to fully employ the principles of TND.

A commitment to the principles of TND and quality planning, architecture, and urban design also proved crucial. The developers were able to illustrate to the county council how Maple Lawn would truly be unique, setting a new standard for development in their county. The county council was, eventually, persuaded by several arguments. As a mixed-use development, Maple Lawn, unlike most single-use, residential developments, would generate thousands of jobs and millions of dollars in net new annual county revenue. Through a set of approved design guidelines, there were assurances that buildings would face the street, that parking would be hidden behind buildings, creating a true pedestrian-oriented main street, and that a network of walkable streets and blocks would connect commercial and residential areas, as well as re-link disconnected adjoining neighborhoods. The vision for a small town feel and traditional sense of place would be realized through a mix of single family, town home and multi-family housing intermixed throughout, by building narrow streets and short, walkable blocks, lined with comfortable, welcoming architecture, and incorporating a signature community center that would include computer rooms, conference facilities, and rooms for receptions or parties.

Eventually these strategies paid off in the county approval process. The council “got it.” But the exciting story from the developer’s point of view, is that the commitment was worth the effort. Commercial space today is leasing at rates among the highest in the county. Housing is in such demand that builders have had to hold lotteries, and even in the face of a sagging residential real estate market, houses at Maple Lawn continue to sell at prices averaging 20% to 30% higher than comparable housing nearby without the need for builder incentives.

“While we expected a strong response from homebuyers,” related Greenebaum, “what we didn’t expect was that the buyers would place this high of a premium on the product at Maple Lawn. It’s a confirmation that our approach was the right one all along.”

What has driven this kind of strong response from commercial tenants and the residential buyer? One key factor points to the answer: the quality and uniqueness of the master plan and its TND design components.

Although the lengthy approval process revealed many who were opposed to what they felt Maple Lawn represented, such as mixed-use, high density, small lots, and intermixing of housing types, it also served to publicize the concept of TND and prove the principles right. In the case of Maple Lawn, even local real estate experts and commercial brokers were initially skeptical. As it turns out, the market, both homebuyers and commercial/retail tenants, have been starving for developments that employ the principles of TND. It has been near impossible to measure the demand for such development over the past few decades, because it does not exist in the suburbs; it only exists in older, historic, urban neighborhoods. Maple Lawn simply recreated the charm and positive aspects of urban residential neighborhoods within a suburban location and the real estate market responded positively.

What were the components of Maple Lawn’s traditional development that has attracted buyers and commercial tenants so successfully?

The large 600-acre development is broken down into four distinct and recognizable residential neighborhoods and one mixed-use business district. Each neighborhood includes a neighborhood center within a five minute walk, comprises a mix of housing (single family, townhouse, and multi-family) and, where possible, incorporates street level retail and community-oriented services at the neighborhood center. The nostalgic ideal of the “corner store” where one could buy everyday items has been reproduced.

Housing density is much greater than in most suburban developments, but that density is mitigated by neighborhood greens and parks, vibrant, pedestrian-scaled streets, and homes that address the street instead of ignore it. With a mix of types in each neighborhood, and each phase, there is a place for everyone.

An emphasis on walkability in the development allows nearly every Maple Lawn resident to be within a five to ten minute walk of a grocery store, a dry cleaner, a library, a school, or other amenity. Every street in the development is pedestrian-friendly, with sidewalks on both sides of the street.

Residential streets all have alleys, providing homes with automobile access through the rear. Instead of being dominated by large garage doors, the front façade of homes incorporate porches, verandas, stoops, and dooryards.

With over 200 acres of open space, there are recreation activities for everyone. Existing environmental and tree covered areas are preserved. But the most unique aspect of the open space system is the many greens, squares, and parks dispersed and linked throughout each neighborhood. Housing around these greens is in high demand.

Proximity to transportation corridors, specifically I-95. While employment opportunities exist within the office buildings of Maple Lawn, the reality remains that many residents will commute to the Washington or Baltimore metro areas. Moreover, proximity to transportation corridors, and Baltimore-Washington International Airport (BWI) has helped the developer market the commercial, office and retail components of the development as well.

Accessibility to amenities, great housing stock, a vast open space system and retail and restaurants within walking distance of office buildings are important attributes of the business district. Office tenants have shown a huge desire to be near such amenities, enabling commercial development at Maple Lawn to outperform nearby single-use “office parks.”

Parking in the business district, for office and retail buildings, and in the neighborhood centers is always behind the buildings. This preserves the “main street” feel and pedestrian friendliness when shopping or even just strolling. Walking is far more likely when the pedestrian engages shops, storefronts, and sidewalk activity as opposed to berms, parking lots, and backs of houses.

There are only a few of the planning and design elements that Maple Lawn embodies. As new portions of the development are completed, the full expression of traditional neighborhood design will be apparent. As new residents settle in and new businesses open, the attractiveness and success of this type of development will stimulate further Smart Growth. Developers, planners, architects, and municipal officials who grasp the benefits of TND will find that even with opposition, perseverance pays.