

Chapter 11

Community Design

A. OVERVIEW

The purpose of including a Community Design element as a component of this Comprehensive Plan is to ensure that when physical improvements are made to permitted land uses and supporting infrastructure, attention is given to their functionality and that they are environmentally and aesthetically integrated so that they contribute to the long term viability and desirability of the community.

Through the use of design standards a sense of character and identity is given to the community. These standards promote, enhance and protect not only the identity and physical appearance of the residential, commercial and industrial sectors of the community, but also serve to avoid abrupt changes in scale and density, protect view sheds and protect natural amenities and features of the community. Design standards can ensure that new and redeveloped structures are harmonious with their existing surroundings, that negative visual impacts are minimized and that new technologies, building methods and materials are considered to encourage and promote sustainability.

B. GOALS AND ACTIONS

The goal and actions developed for the Community Design chapter recognizes that the enactment of standards in the community to govern the various aspects of building, infrastructure and landscape design will serve to integrate the community.

Goal:

Develop and implement exceptional Community Design Standards for new construction and the redevelopment of existing parcels.

Actions:

- Create a unified, readily apparent and positive image for the community
- Protect, enhance and integrate natural amenities and features
- Create functional and visual linkages
- Promote quality building
- Preserve and enhance the community's quality of life

C. EXISTING CONDITIONS

There are currently no universal design standards in the City of Fairmont as part of the Zoning or Building Codes, the concept is present however in various forms in areas such as the subdivision ordinance, select zoning districts and through programs such as Main Street Fairmont and the Historic Preservation Review Commission.

The City of Fairmont subdivision ordinance requires attention be given to the design and planning of subdivisions during their development in the areas of streets, sidewalks, alleys, utilities, drainage and the individual lots. These requirements are general in nature and only address dimensional issues such as the “lot size” or the “street width”. The Ordinance does not address landscaping in the subdivision, signage for the development, style, scale or density of the proposed subdivision.

In select zoning districts such as the Higher Education District and the Pro-Zone District, Plan Review is required for all proposed new development. During Plan Review in the Higher Education zoning district, applicants are required to detail such elements in their development plans as:

1. Actual shape, location, and dimensions of the lot to be built upon.
2. Topography of existing and finish grades.
3. Shape, size, and location of all buildings and other structures to be erected, added to, or moved and any buildings or other structures already on the lot.
4. Existing and intended use of all buildings and structures.
5. Location and type of exterior lighting.
6. Location and design of off-street parking, points of access, off-street loading areas, and pedestrian circulation.
7. Location and size of nearest water line, sewer line, fire hydrants, and any other public and private utilities.
8. Plans for the provision of water service, fire hydrants, sewer service, and other public and private utilities.
9. Minimum required front, side, and rear yard setbacks.
10. All easements with dimensions and designated as to their purpose.
11. Plans for storm water drainage and control.
12. All identified floodable areas and flood proofing measures if applicable.
13. Location and dimensions of all signs.
14. Location and dimensions of all buffer and landscape yards.
15. Location and type of landscaping and screening.
16. Any other information concerning the lot or adjoining lots as deemed necessary by the Building Inspector.

In the Pro-Zone District applicants are required to address three areas in order to obtain site plan approval; 1) Ingress and egress to a public street; 2) Location of all features of the development including all principal buildings, open spaces and parking areas; and 3) A landscape plan, including fencing and screening of parking areas.

In the Technology zoning district, Plan Review is also required before any improvement shall be commenced, erected, constructed, altered, or maintained upon any Lot, or any change or alteration made, or any subdivision, plat, or replat made until the plans, specifications, and location shall have been submitted to and approved by the City. To gain such approval, the applicants must address the following set of criteria:

Minimum Setback Lines: No structure of any kind, and no part thereof, shall be placed on any site closer to a property line than herein provided, unless approved by the City.

- A. Building line setback from street property lines --- the minimum setback line is established as fifty (50) feet from the edge of any street or road within the Zone.
- B. Building line setback from rear property line --- unless in conflict with above, the minimum side setback is established at twenty (20) feet.
- C. Building line setback from side property line --- unless in conflict with above, the minimum side setback is established at twenty (20) feet.

Drainage and Erosion Control: Every Lot and/or individual development within the Zone must conform to the requirements of a site and drainage plan, and must be approved by the appropriate regulatory agencies, as well as the City Engineer and the Director of Public Works.

Excavation and Site Grading: No excavation or grading shall be permitted except in connection with construction of an improvement, and upon completion thereof, exposed openings shall be backfilled, graded, and leveled.

Site Furniture Site furniture and mechanical equipment visible from a street shall be considered as landscape elements and all site furniture shall be in accordance with City Code.

Curb Cuts It is intended that curb cuts be minimized and designed in accordance with West Virginia Department of Highways and City of Fairmont specifications and approved by the Director of Public Works.

Off Street Parking No parking shall be permitted on any street, lawn, median strip, public walkway, swale, berm, or other unpaved area or at any place other than on the paved parking spaces provided for and described herein below. Each owner and tenant of the Zone shall be responsible for compliance with the foregoing by his employees and visitors. Off-street parking shall be provided by each owner and tenant for employees, customers, and visitors. The location, number, and size of parking spaces shall be in accordance with Article 1343 of this Code.

All off-street parking, access drives, and loading areas shall be paved and properly graded to assure proper drainage. Overnight parking of campers, mobile homes, boats, trailers, or motor homes is prohibited. If parking requirements increase as a result of the change in use or number of employees, additional off-street parking shall be provided as determined by the City Planner.

Loading, Service, and Outside Storage Each Lot devoted to development shall provide sufficient on-site loading facilities to accommodate site activities. All loading movement, including turnarounds, shall be made off of the public right-of-way. Loading docks shall be located and screened so as to minimize their visibility from any street or other right-of-way. Screening of service areas, loading docks, and so forth may consist of any approved combination on earth mounding, landscaping, walls, and/or fencing. All screened materials, supplies, and equipment shall be permitted to remain outside of any building. Tanks, motors, and special technological equipment will be permitted to remain outside of any building as long as they are screened from the street and surrounding property. Rubbish and garbage facilities shall be screened so as not to be visible form any street or right-of-way. All screening shall meet the requirements as prescribed in Section 1341.19 of this Code.

Utility Connections All utility connections, including all gas docks, propane tanks, electrical, and telephone connections and installations of wires to buildings shall be designed and installed in accordance with the appropriate regulatory code.

Exterior and Interior Lighting:

Exterior lighting on all building sites shall be limited to signs and security and safety illumination of streets or roadways, parking lots, access drives and walks, building entrances, loading areas, and service areas and exterior lighting of overall building surfaces. No flashing, traveling, animated, or intermittent lighting shall be visible from the exterior of any building. Pole mounted exterior fixtures shall be limited to a maximum height of thirty (30) feet, unless approved by the Building Inspector.

Working through the four-point National Program, Main Street Fairmont's Design Committee focuses on improving Downtown Fairmont's image by enhancing its physical appearance, not just of buildings, but also of street lights, window displays, parking areas, signs, sidewalks, promotional materials and all other elements that convey a positive visual message within the context of historic preservation in Fairmont's Downtown Historic District and the Merchant Street shopping area.

Under Ordinance 1280 adopted by the Fairmont City Council in August of 2004 the Fairmont Historic Preservation Review Commission was created and granted design review authority over the Downtown Historic District in Fairmont. Provisions are included in the Ordinance that would allow the Commission to obtain design review authority over additional historic districts through a public hearing process overseen by the Fairmont Planning Commission and Fairmont City Council. The HPRC currently conducts design review in Downtown based upon a set of guidelines that are designed to help property owners formulate plans for the rehabilitation, preservation, and continued use of buildings in historic districts as required by City of Fairmont Ordinance. Adherence to the guidelines will result in the Commission issuing a Certificate of Appropriateness for the applicants' project.

The guidelines pertain to buildings of all occupancy and construction types, sizes, and materials. They apply to permanent and temporary construction on the exterior of historic buildings as well as new attached or adjacent construction. Generally, it is recommended that deteriorated material be repaired, or replaced with new material that duplicates the old as closely as possible. New material, which is inappropriate or was unavailable when the building was constructed, such as artificial brick siding, artificial cast stone or brick veneer, is discouraged. All buildings, structures, and sites should be recognized as products of their own time. Alterations that have no historical basis and which seek to create an earlier appearance are discouraged. Previous changes to a building, structure, or site and its environment may have acquired significance in their own right, and this significance should be recognized and respected. Additional guidelines for various construction and renovation activities include;

1. AWNINGS AND CANOPIES

Awnings cover the area between the sidewalk and building. They protect pedestrians and shelter

display windows from sun, rain and snow. Awnings add depth to the building surface and embellish entrances. Awning locations should respect the storefront framework in order to maintain a visual connection with upper floors and reinforce the rhythm of the streetscape. When used in appropriate locations, awnings can be an effective investment -- as on south facing storefronts, over outdoor seating areas, and over entrances. North facing' storefront locations, or as substitutes for signs, are not the most effective or economical use of awnings.

Even though awnings may appear temporary in nature, they can affect the overall image of the building. Proper maintenance and repair of awnings are important in conveying a positive visual image. While awnings that incorporate signs or graphics may be cost effective initially, long-term maintenance as information changes or as awnings fade is difficult, unattractive, or impossible.

Awnings must be installed and maintained in accordance with all city and state codes.

Unacceptable

Vinyl or plastic materials.

Concealing architectural details with continuous or oversized awnings.

Back lit or internally illuminated awnings.

Unusually shaped awnings or bullnose awnings that are not compatible with storefront design or existing architectural forms.

Acceptable

Canvas awnings. Simple awning shapes.

Awnings with open ends are preferred and are less susceptible to vandalism.

Both retractable and fixed type awnings are acceptable. If vandalism is a concern, the retractable type may be preferred.

Under-awning lights which illuminate the sidewalk and storefront. (This type is different from back-lit awnings, which are not acceptable.)

On multi-storefront buildings, separate awnings should be located within each storefront opening so that the building frame and details are revealed.

Awnings on a single building should be consistent in size, profile, and location whether they are for the same business or not.

Creative awning shapes must be carefully designed and coordinated with the overall appearance of the building.

Minimal signage on awnings, located primarily on the valance.

2. CONSTRUCTION OF NEW BUILDINGS, ADDITIONS, OR DECKS

Contemporary design for alterations and additions, including decks, to existing properties will not be discouraged when such alterations and additions do not destroy significant historic, architectural or cultural materials, and the design is compatible with the size, scale, color, material, and character of the property, neighborhood and environment.

Wherever possible, new additions or alterations to structures should be done in such a manner that if such additions or alterations were removed in the future, the essential form and character of the

historic structure would be unimpaired.

New additions and adjacent reconstruction should be compatible in scale, building materials and texture. New additions should complement the style of the historic structure, but should also appear as products of their own age. A void imitating an earlier style of architecture in new additions that have a completely contemporary function. New additions should not imitate architectural styles which predate that of the historic structure.

3. PORCHES, HANDRAILS, AND STEPS

Porches and steps which are appropriate to the building and its development should be retained. Porches, handrails, or steps reflecting later architectural styles are often important to the building's historical integrity and, wherever possible, should be retained.

The original material and architectural features of porches and steps, such as hand rails, balusters, columns, brackets, and roof decoration of wood, iron, cast iron, terra cotta, tile, should be retained wherever possible. If these materials must be replaced, the new materials should match the old as closely as possible.

4. DEMOLITIONS

Demolitions forever destroy historic structures and effect changes to historic districts that can never be undone. Demolitions will only be approved when dire structural deterioration or financial burden can be clearly demonstrated.

5. DOORS AND WINDOWS

Existing window and door openings including window sash, glass, lintels, sills, frames, molding, shutters, doors, steps, and all hardware should be retained and repaired wherever possible. Introducing new window or door openings into the principal elevations, or altering window or door openings to fit new stock window sash or new stock door sizes is discouraged. Such changes destroy the scale and proportion of the building.

If new sash and doors must be used they should duplicate the material, design and hardware of the older existing ones. Inappropriate new window or door features are discouraged. These include Plexiglas, aluminum storm and screen window insulating glass combinations that require the removal of original window and doors or the modification of the original size. Storm windows and doors may be installed if they are visually unobtrusive, do not damage existing frames, and can be removed in the future. Storm windows should match the trim color. Mill finished aluminum and vinyl frames can be painted. Stark white aluminum will be discouraged because the finish is an intense artificial color that does not become dull with age, For buildings with white trim, or white frame houses, some manufacturers produce an off-white which is more acceptable.

6. EXTERNAL UTILITIES & SERVICE CONNECTIONS

Necessary mechanical services should be installed in areas and spaces that will require the least possible alteration and damage to the exterior structural condition and physical appearance of the building.

Exterior electrical and telephone cables should be installed in places where they will be visually unobtrusive.

Television antennae and mechanical equipment such as, air conditioners and solar panels should be placed in as inconspicuous a location as possible. The installation of such equipment should not affect the principal elevation.

7. FENCES AND WALLS

Walls and fences are important elements of design and character of a structure and district. The Review Commission must approve changes to existing elements or designs for new ones. Removal or replacement by inappropriate design or material is discouraged. Privacy fences of appropriate material are acceptable, but chain link fences are discouraged.

8. FIRE ESCAPES

Fire escapes should be added in a manner which does not alter existing exits or other important architectural features and spaces. To the degree possible, fire escapes should be erected where they will not be visible from a main street. Fire escapes must comply with all city and state codes. The review Commission will cooperate in the investigation of alternative life safety measures which preserve the character and architectural integrity of the building.

D. BASIC ISSUES

As noted in the previous section, there currently are some programs and policies that do address design elements in relation to new construction and renovation, but they do so in a basic manner and only in certain areas or under certain conditions. The overall objective of this comprehensive planning process has been based on creating a guiding document that will allow the City of Fairmont to achieve economic vitality, community stability, and environmental health that leads to the sustainability of the community. While this does not end all of the social and economic problems of the City and its residents, sustainability certainly cannot be advanced without a coherent and supportive physical framework being created for the community. To achieve this, the community must consider how low-density residential development threatens open space, raises public service costs, encourages people and wealth to leave city centers, creates traffic congestion, and degrades the environment and our quality of life and take action by developing solutions for curbing sprawl, preserving open space and redeveloping the downtowns and traditional neighborhoods of the community. All of these issues begin with the design of the community.

An opportunity has been created with the adoption of the WV State Planning Enabling Legislation in 2004 for communities to move from traditional regulatory zoning to provide for innovative land

uses and management techniques, including the establishment of Design Standards. Inclusion of design standards in Fairmont would allow for a shift to occur in the conventional development patterns of the City that focused solely on the permitted uses within the districts and less on the design of the uses. These standards would address areas such as; building location, heights, scale and style; parking, its screening and lighting; signage; and landscaping in ways that integrate the community and provide a sense of character and place.

E. RECOMMENDATIONS

Short Range (2005-2008)

- A. The City of Fairmont should develop and implement as part of a new Zoning Ordinance quality Design Standards that are applied to all zoning districts.

Medium Range (2008-2011)

- A. The City of Fairmont should review the impact of Design Standards on the development patterns in the City and evaluate the continued use of this technique.

Long Range (2011-2015)

- A. Continue review and evaluation of the Design Standards land use management technique.