Development Districts

Practice Description

Development districts, often referred to as special zoning districts, are created for the purpose of permitting property development. Development districts are characterized by larger site areas (typically 5 or more acres), and their construction requires complex and coordinated rezoning, transportation, and planning efforts. Examples of special zoning districts include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Transit Oriented Development districts,
- Business Improvement Districts,
- Traditional Neighborhood Designs,
- Brownfields Redevelopment Projects, and
- Main Street Revitalization Districts.

A development district's stormwater handling performance is typically assessed at the site, neighborhood, regional or watershed levels. While the construction of a development district may involve a higher percentage of imperviousness than surrounding or conventional patterns, satisfying development needs on a smaller footprint brings benefits. In addition, the coordinated planning effort can help identify strategic opportunities for infiltration, stormwater recapture, and treatment.

Planning Considerations

A city, county or town's Planning or Zoning Department usually develops plans for development districts. Stormwater managers may need to meet with planning counterparts to coordinate plans, since the common, stand-alone elements found in stormwater management plans for individual sites (such as site coverage limitations, infiltration requirements, and rules discouraging sidewalks) can run counter to the urban design elements of successful development districts.

A development district's effectiveness can be viewed at the site, neighborhood, and watershed levels. Redevelopment can significantly reduce the demand for new development elsewhere in the watershed. Designs that repair existing infrastructure and treat stormwater on-site are particularly beneficial. Where urban redevelopment occurs on open lots that serve a stormwater handling function, the city and developer will need to assess the impacts neighborhood-wide and mitigate accordingly.

Clustering, open space, and other "green" designs offer stormwater and water quality benefits to communities considering new housing developments. However, the site's design needs to be combined with watershed and regional planning designs that curb uncontrolled, large-scale growth. It is important to consider neighborhood and watershed outcomes. Will new conservation development spur unplanned development? Does conservation development complement the community's overall conservation goals? How does the new development relate to jobs, schools, and services?

The costs of developing and implementing coordinated development districts vary. The primary drivers of these costs are consultant and staff time to develop or align plans; repair or establishment of water, sewer, and transportation infrastructure; and any incentives a city, county, or township provides to developers or public/private partnerships. For developers, costs can vary from a conventional site plan, dependent upon the combinations of BMPs and the relative cost of a more complex site development plan. However, many redevelopment projects command a premium market price due to their location or enhanced desirability.

Design Criteria

Development districts can be incorporated anywhere. One main consideration for rural areas might be a lack of zoning or other land use classification. Subdivision regulations or drainage district requirements may impede plans to establish a mix of uses or higher densities. For urban areas, look for designs that reuse existing impervious surface and infrastructure and provide opportunities to repair infrastructure or handle stormwater on-site. For conservation subdivisions or designs, look closely at the connections among transportation, community services, and jobs. The water quality benefits of conservation clustering can be negated if the new housing becomes part of a development pattern that includes dispersed uses, demands for upgrades to urban-level services and transportation, and a lack of connections among infrastructure elements.

Compact Project and Community Design

Compact project and community design is a powerful strategy for reducing a development's footprint and, hence, its stormwater impact. Reducing an individual building's footprint is another strategy, though there are circumstances that call for

greater lot coverage in districts where higher development intensity is needed (near transit stations, for example). Compact development also lends itself to more environmentally friendly transportation options, such as walking and biking, or shorter and less frequent automobile trips.

Street Design and Transportation Options

Well-designed, compact communities are served by a highly connected street and trail system designed for multiple modes of transportation. The pattern need not be a grid; in some areas, topography and environmentally sensitive areas will influence where roads go. A compact district also provides for more efficient use and reuse of infrastructure.

Mix of Uses

A community's transportation options increase when jobs, housing, and commercial activities are located close together. Efficiencies for providing infrastructure also emerge. Fewer auto trips reduce the need to accommodate standard parking requirements. Mixing daytime and nighttime uses increases the opportunities for businesses to share parking spaces.

Regional Applicability

Development districts can be large redevelopment efforts, infill projects, or new "greenfields" projects. The regional applicability is strong since successful development districts coordinate multiple objectives, including environmental protection and stormwater control. These districts also tend to handle more development intensity and a mix of uses on a smaller footprint; Thus, they also have applicability for watershed planning and source water protection.

Ultra-Urban Applicability

Although land constraints and large developable sites can be a challenge, certain types of development district planning, such as transit oriented development and business improvement districts, are common in urban areas.

Urban development and redevelopment projects are more likely to be served by heavier transit, follow a traditional street pattern, and be governed by a complex set of existing land development requirements. Municipalities can use a combination of policies to promote desired densities. Some of these policies include the following:

- Transfer of development rights receiving zones – A system in which a landowner in a "preservation area" or "sending zone" gets credits for forgoing development rights that he can sell or have a "bank" consolidate. Developers can buy and use these credits to gain permission for denser development in "receiving zones," which are areas targeted for denser development,

- Bonus densities – which permit developers who agree to complete projects or project additions that meet specific goals to increase density,

- Create mixed-use zoning,
- Create form-based zoning codes,
- Modify parking policies that, for example, create a maximum number of parking spaces allowed and have better management of on-street parking,
- Create sidewalk improvement programs,
- Encourage micro-detention stormwater handling areas such as use of rain gardens or stormwater BMPs that serve multiple purposes (i.e., green roofs),
- Encourage street tree canopy programs,
- Create financial incentives (tax-increment financing, vacant property reform),
- Enact or promote programs to enhance transit use,
- Enact rehabilitation codes for older buildings using proprietary devices (e.g., in-pipe filtration devices).

Suburban Settings

Suburban development districts are likely to take advantage of existing development and infrastructure, and require connections among older developed areas. In addition to some of the policies in urban settings, planners and developers in suburban settings could consider the following BMPs and policies to aid in protecting water resources:

- Promote Grayfields programs to redevelop underperforming malls and strip malls,
- Create highway corridor redevelopment programs,
- Enhance retail and housing districts around park and ride lots,
- Adopt Smart Growth street design standards at local and state levels,
- Establish infill policies,
- Adopt traditional neighborhood design manuals that integrate transportation.

Rural Settings

Rural development districts are likely to occur on undeveloped or sparsely developed land. Successful rural development districts will complement or spur rural employment opportunities, such as agriculture, manufacturing, or warehousing and distribution. To protect water resources on a regional scale, planners should encourage conservation of rural settings to offset increased impervious areas in urban and suburban settings.

Policies that encourage economic development while retaining rural character include:

- Create transfer of development rights sending zones,
- Establish water protection overlay zones,
- Connect housing with rural job and transportation centers,

- Create watershed-wide impervious surface trading programs,
- Create design manuals for rural housing or housing in environmentally sensitive areas,
- Encourage “Main Street” redevelopment programs in older downtowns.

Common Problems

If the stormwater regulations for redevelopment districts are more stringent than those for greenfields, cities may find it difficult to attract developers. Rules for water protection and stormwater should be consistent watershed-wide.

During the site design process, pressures may develop to eliminate elements critical to a development district’s environmental performance. For example, a successful development district will shorten, combine, or eliminate auto trips. However, if pressure mounts to increase parking or decrease connections among uses, a city or county may be unable to reduce the amount of impervious surfaces, diminishing transportation and water benefits.

Maintenance

Various design elements will direct a development district’s maintenance plan, although it is likely to include a combination of BMPs. Comprehensive redevelopment plans include common urban design elements like tree-lined streets, water features, and landscaping. Planners and stormwater professionals should look to these features to achieve urban design and water quality goals, and plan their maintenance procedures accordingly.