



Methuen Center Smart Growth Overlay District

# METHUEN CENTER DESIGN GUIDELINES

## Final Draft

April 10, 2017

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## I. Introduction

### A. Design Purpose and Objectives

The Methuen Center Smart Growth Zoning Overlay District (MCSGOD) is intended to encourage Smart Growth and support mixed-use and multifamily residential development in Methuen Center, consistent with Massachusetts General Laws, M.G.L. c. 40R and 760 CMR 59.00 regulations.

Developers may elect whether to develop a project in accordance to the MCSGOD or in accordance with the requirements of the underlying zoning. If the developer chooses Smart Growth in accordance to the MCSGOD, projects will be subject to plan review and approval by the local Plan Approval Authority, in this case, the Community Development Board. The following Guiding Principles and Design Guidelines aim to advance compact development, historic preservation, walkable neighborhoods, and the protection of natural features in the design or redesign of Project sites; and to emphasize the importance of appropriate building scale, a relationship between historical and contemporary design, and the renovation and adaptive reuse of existing buildings in the MCSGOD.

## II. Guiding Principles

### A. Site Design Principles

#### 1. Compact Development

Compact development, or compact building design as it also is called, is a core principle of Smart Growth that promotes the design of communities that make more efficient use of land and resources, encouraging walking and bicycling, and preserving more open space. Compact buildings that support high residential density within a highly efficient footprint can result in more land dedicated to open space and recreation; the protection of natural resources; and the preservation of permeable surfaces that absorb and filter rainwater, thus reducing the risk of flooding and water pollution.

#### 2. Historic Preservation

The Town of Methuen is rich in historic and cultural resources, including many historic buildings and several historic districts, two of which comprise areas located within the boundaries of the MCSGOD – the Searles Tenney Nevins Historic District and the Spicket Falls National Register District. New construction, renovation, and rehabilitation of existing buildings in these districts are subject to the Historic District Commission Rules and Regulations, including design guidelines and sign regulations, such as the Searles Tenney Nevins



Historic District Design Guidelines Handbook and the Methuen Sign Guide, prepared by the Methuen Historic District Commission.

The design guidelines herein provided are aimed at being compatible with all the other applicable historic district rules and regulations. These guidelines aim to protect the historic character of existing resources by supporting design preservation and the 'replacement in kind' of historical design features.

### **3. Walkable Neighborhoods**

Walkable neighborhoods are designed to facilitate and promote pedestrian activity by locating housing, businesses, services, and amenities within easy walking distance, and supporting the design of safe and attractive pedestrian environments. Thus, walkable communities tend to be healthier, more prosperous, more attractive and more sustainable, both from an environmental and a socio-economic perspective. An important component of walkable neighborhoods is mixed-use development.

### **4. Protection of Natural Features**

Protection of open space, rivers, wetlands, and naturally vegetated areas is a companion goal to compact development. Open space provides a habitat for plant and animal species, cleanses and purifies air and water, and creates opportunities for farming and recreation. Smart Growth is aimed at curbing urban sprawl by steering new development to existing urban areas and preserving open space and natural features as invaluable resources for current and future generations.

## **B. Building Design Principles**

### **1. Relationship to Human Scale**

Building scale is an architectural term that refers to the relative size of a building or any design element compared to other buildings or design elements. Human scale refers to the relative size of a building or architectural design element to the human body, and to other design elements that are specifically recognizable or familiar, such as a house, a door or a piece of furniture designed to fit the human body. People tend to feel more comfortable and react more favorably to buildings that exhibit design features and proportions that relate to the human scale, and these design guidelines call for the creation of such relationship.

### **2. Relationship of Historical to Contemporary Design**

New buildings in a historic neighborhood should relate harmoniously to their neighborhood context by establishing relationships of scale,



dimensions, design patterns, and materials that are compatible with the historic design character of adjacent buildings. New buildings should not necessarily mimic the design character of historic buildings; they may exhibit a design character that is reflective of contemporary program needs and requirements, but their architecture should be integrated into the historic design character of the existing neighborhood by means of its articulation, proportions, materials, and design expression.

### **3. Renovation and Adaptive Reuse**

The renovation or adaptive reuse of existing buildings is preferable to demolition and replacement with new construction, especially when the existing buildings are made of durable, high quality materials, and when their design and layout is flexible enough to adapt to new uses and needs. This is particularly true for historic buildings constructed prior to 1930 that used high quality materials. These guidelines are aimed at protecting the historic character of existing buildings and their contribution to the historic design character of the district.

### **4. Green Building**

Site and building design concepts that are compatible with green building principles, materials, and methods are encouraged, as they promote energy conservation and reduce negative impacts on the environment.

## **III. Design Guidelines**

### **A. Architectural Guidelines**

#### **1. Building Massing, Scale and Proportions**

- a. Building massing, scale, and proportions should be complementary to, and respectful of, the form patterns of existing buildings in the immediate vicinity.
- b. Building façades, footprints, and rooflines should be articulated to vary the streetscape and provide visual interest. Variations in building height, depth and direction of exterior wall planes, contrasts between solid and void, and rhythmical patterns of architectural design elements may be employed to achieve articulation.
- c. The shape and massing of new and renovated buildings should provide a balance among building height, story-height, building width, and bay width that is compatible with those of adjacent buildings, especially when the existing buildings are historic or contribute to the historic character of the district.



- d. Elements that may help to relate building massing proportionally may include: articulated building bases through a change in material or treatment, placement of windows in a regular pattern, articulation of building entries with porches or awnings, and façade and roof projections (e.g., bay windows, balconies, gables, dormers, turrets).
- e. Architectural details, such as awnings, moldings, vertical piers, pilasters, or the size and location of door and window openings, should be used to relate the building design to the human scale, at least on all sides of a building visible from a street.
- f. If there is a discrepancy greater than one-story between the proposed building height and the height patterns of adjacent existing buildings, design alternatives should be considered for context sensitivity based upon articulation of façade, building mass, scale, bulk and proportions, or other building massing considerations.
- g. Upper stories may be set back, treated with a different material, or incorporated into the roofline, to diminish building mass or to make a building more compatible with the design of adjacent buildings.

## 2. Building Orientation and Entrances

- a. Buildings should be oriented with the primary building façade(s) facing the primary street frontage(s) of the site.
- b. Building massing and façades should be designed to frame streets and public spaces, to provide a sense of spatial enclosure and to define street edges.
- c. A building's main entrance should be clearly visible and easily accessible from the primary street(s).
- d. Entrances should provide a distinctive and welcoming composition that is integrated into the overall massing and design of the building.
- e. Storefronts in commercial and mixed-use buildings should be oriented to the primary street(s) with access, visibility, and transparency from streets and public spaces.
- f. Building and shop entrances should be recessed to a minimum depth equal to the width of the door to prevent doors from swinging into the sidewalk.
- g. Residential and mixed-use buildings should provide adequate privacy for onsite residential units and units on adjacent properties



by orienting buildings toward open space or pedestrian ways, placing public rooms closer to pedestrian ways than private rooms, and using streetscape or plantings to screen the windows of private rooms.

### 3. Exterior Appearance of Buildings

- a. The design of primary building façades with frontage along the street should be sensitive to the existing context of building façades along that street. Front façade materials and detailing should be carried over to any side elevations facing a street.
- b. Building entries may add distinctive design components to the building façade such as porches, canopies, glazed areas, and stoops.
- c. At least two of the following design elements should be repeated in adjacent buildings: design treatment at the ground level, relative location and size of doors and windows, window style and proportions, location of signs, dominant façade material, dominant color, cornice lines, or dominant roof form.
- d. The length of any continuous wall along a building's façade facing a street should not exceed 40% of the façade's total length, or 60 horizontal feet, whichever is less, without incorporating at least two of the following: color change, material change, texture change, plane projections of recesses, storefronts, trellises, balconies, roof pitch, doors, or windows.
- e. The use of balconies, porches, and stoops in residential and mixed-use buildings is encouraged.
- f. There should be a direct vertical correspondence between the design of the façade of the upper floors and the ground level retail façades in commercial and mixed-use buildings.
- g. Separate access to second story residential units should be easily distinguished by location and design from retail and commercial entrances.
- h. Windows on the ground floor of the primary façade of mixed-use and commercial buildings should not use mirrored or tinted glass, or be obstructed by curtains, shades, or blinds.
- i. Original window patterns and openings should be preserved or restored, including conservation and repair to preserve historical trim and details, in the redevelopment of historic buildings and buildings that contribute to the historic design character of the



district. New windows, if the old ones cannot be repaired, should fill the entire opening as originally intended.

- j. Mechanical equipment located on top of the building should be setback, screened, or enclosed within the roof shape, to conceal it from public view and from the windows of residential units.

#### **4. Building Materials**

- a. Building façade exterior materials, including architectural trim and cladding, should be of high quality and durable, including, but not limited to: stone, brick, wood shingles or clapboard, wood trim, metal, glass, and integrated or textured masonry.
- b. Synthetic siding materials and materials on the façade that are subject to deterioration (plywood or plastic) should be avoided or removed and replaced with more durable materials (wood shingles, clapboard, brick, or metal).
- c. Repairs and alterations in historic buildings should not damage or destroy materials, features, or finishes that are important in defining the building's historic character.
- d. Deteriorated historic features should be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature should match the old in design, color, texture, and other visual qualities, and, where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features should be substantiated by documentary, physical, or pictorial evidence.
- e. The use of paint colors that are appropriate to the historic period of a building, and compatible and harmonious with adjacent buildings is encouraged.
- f. Exterior materials should not include vinyl, aluminum, or synthetic siding.
- g. Uninterrupted, multi-level glazing may not be used as a primary façade design treatment.
- h. Roofing materials visible from public sidewalks or streets should be of high quality and durable, including, but not limited to: slate, copper, ceramic slate tile, or architectural asphalt shingle.

#### **5. Exterior Signs**

- a. Signs displaying business or product names and logos should be directly associated with the principal service or products of the establishment.



- b. Signs should present a clear message and be well designed to complement the architectural character of the building in style and placement.
- c. On multi-tenant buildings, signs should be coordinated and located at the same height on the building façade, preferably on a sign band or with awnings.
- d. A sign band should be a space clearly defined by architectural elements, trim or moldings, where signs may be placed above the storefront windows.
- e. Signs and awnings on a single building should be consistent in size, profile, location, material, color, and design; they may not obscure important architectural details by crossing over pilasters, or covering windows or trim elements.
- f. The use of traditional materials, such as wood or metal, is encouraged; plastic signs are not permitted in the Searles Tenney Nevins Historic District.
- g. Internally lit (backlit plastic) signs, internally lit awnings, moving, animated or flashing signs will not be permitted.
- h. Exterior illumination of signs should be provided by a continuous lighting source in the 'white light' spectrum, which should not cast light onto the street, pedestrians, or adjacent properties.
- i. The size of signs on a building should not exceed 20% of the storefront area or 15% of the entire façade (whichever is smaller).
- j. Building signs should have simple geometric shapes with two or three colors to complement the colors of the building. Signs using light-colored letters against a dark background are encouraged.
- k. Window signs, such as information signage (hours of operation, sales info, etc.) should be high quality vinyl die cut letters or painted directly onto the glass.
- l. All window signs combined, including temporary signs, should not cover more than 10% of the total glass area.
- m. Projecting signs may be allowed only for retail uses, and should convey information in a unique and artistic way, utilizing images that convey the goods or services provided at the premises.
- n. Projecting signs should hang below the sill height of the second floor, or the roof cornice (whichever is lower).



## C. Site Plan and Design

### 1. Placement of Buildings

- a. Buildings should be placed close to the street to facilitate public pedestrian access and conceal parking at the interior or rear of the lot.
- b. Building placement should relate to the existing patterns of building placement for the street or square on which they are located, and contribute to define the edges of streets and public spaces.
- c. Multifamily residential buildings facing the street, with no commercial use on the ground floor, may be setback from the front property line. The setback area should be landscaped with a mix of shrubs and low plantings to support privacy of residential areas.

### 2. Onsite Open Spaces

- a. Site design should include new public and/or private open spaces, yards, or patios accessible to building residents when residential buildings are not located adjacent to public open spaces.
- b. Onsite open spaces should be designed, landscaped, and furnished to be compatible with, or complementary to, the overall design character of the project and the surrounding neighborhood context.
- c. Onsite open spaces may include pocket parks or playgrounds, outdoor sitting areas, benches, and community gardens, which could also be accessible to the public if adjacent to a street or public space.

### 3. Free Standing Signs

- a. Free standing and ground signs should be compatible in design and materials with the design of the building.
- b. Ground signs should use durable and high quality materials, such as wood, metal, and stone piers.
- c. Attractive landscaping should be provided around the base of a ground sign to enhance its image and surroundings.
- d. Single pole signs and the use of exposed structural supports for freestanding signs should be avoided.



## 5. Landscaping

- a. Landscape features should frame streets and public spaces, and define edges, while shielding negative views such as dumpsters or loading areas.
- b. Plantings should not conflict with the visibility of site entrance and exit drives, access ways, or road intersections.
- c. New trees and shrubs should be selected from indigenous species native to the region and noninvasive species adapted to the area.
- d. Tree species should be selected to maintain adequate height clearances for sidewalk circulation and good visibility of commercial storefronts.
- e. Site and landscape features should be integrated with the architectural design to reflect a coordinated site and building design concept.
- f. Street furniture, such as benches, bike racks, and trash and recycling receptacles, should be clustered at convenient locations that are plainly visible and accessible.
- g. Stone walls and fences may be used to help differentiate private space from public space, provide privacy for residents and their guests from passersby, and to provide continuity to a streetscape.
- h. Retaining walls adjacent to public spaces or traveled ways should be constructed of good quality and durable materials, such as stone, decorative block, stamped concrete, or stone veneer.

## 6. Buffering

- a. Landscaping should be used to buffer and screen edges that may have a negative visual impact, such as parking, delivery areas, trash dumpsters, outdoor storage, or loading areas.
- b. Landscape buffers should include at least two of the following components: evergreens, deciduous trees, shrubs, berms, fences, green walls, and decorative walls.
- c. Mixed-use buildings should be visually buffered from adjacent residential properties with a combination of evergreens, deciduous vegetation, and fencing.
- d. Decorative walls, evergreen foliage, shrubs, fencing, or other view-obstructing materials should be used to conceal site mechanical, electrical, and communications equipment and meters from public view.



## D. Traveled Ways

### 1. Placement and Alignment

- a. New construction and site infrastructure should reinforce a network of continuous, convenient, and safe pedestrian connections along sidewalks to and from all pedestrian entrances.
- b. Residential driveways should be designed for slow vehicle speeds and safe for all modes of travel.
- c. Projects that include more than one building in their site plan should design an internal circulation network incorporating walking, bicycling, and driving. Motor vehicle circulation should be designed to avoid conflicts with pedestrians and bicycles.
- d. The pedestrian network should not include streets or spaces that are primarily used for vehicular connections, deliveries, and services.

### 2. Sidewalks and Curb Cuts

- a. Sidewalks in front of mixed-use buildings with commercial use on the ground floor, and setbacks if provided to widen the sidewalk, should include pedestrian amenities such as benches, decorative planters, flower boxes, or decorative paving patterns.
- b. In commercial areas, and when allowed by street dimensions, sidewalks may be widened to accommodate street trees, landscaping, outdoor furniture, and pedestrian amenities.
- c. Curb cuts should be minimized and combined whenever possible into one main access point per property, depending on needs for truck and emergency access.
- d. In general, curb cuts should not exceed twenty-four (24) feet in width, measured at the point of tangency with the driveway curb radius.
- e. Sidewalks should be continuous and uninterrupted at driveways and curb cuts to strengthen priority for pedestrians.

### 3. Materials

- a. Brick or granite pavers may be used to enhance the character of sidewalks, pathways, and outdoor sitting areas.
- b. When employed, brick or granite pavers should be selected and set in a manner that limits uneven surfaces or joints that would become an impediment to accessibility.



- c. Driveways, bikeways, sidewalks, and pedestrian paths should incorporate appropriate lighting, street furniture, landscaping, and signage.
- d. Where not shared with paved ways or sidewalks, designated bicycle paths should be paved with asphalt or a similar smooth and elastic, monolithic surfacing material. Where bicycle connections cross a vehicular road, a change in paving or striping should delineate the bicycle path.

## **E. Parking**

### **1. Off-Street Parking**

- a. Parking areas should be located on the interior of blocks, behind buildings, or at the rear of sites, away from prominent site edges, public spaces, and streets.
- b. Parking areas should be separated from adjacent residential and mixed-use properties by landscaped buffers, as described in Section III.B.5 Buffering.
- c. Parking areas visible from the street should be screened from street view by fences, gates, walls, landscaping, permanent planters, hedges, or combinations of these elements.
- d. Structured parking, parking sub-grade, or on the first level of multifamily buildings is encouraged where feasible, to minimize impervious surfaces and reduce the overall impact of parking lots.
- e. When structured parking is incorporated into residential buildings, it should be properly screened from public view and designed to complement the building façade and the adjacent streetscape.
- f. Large parking lots are discouraged, but where necessary, they should incorporate landscaping in the form of trees and vegetated aisles or swales, and comfortable destination-oriented passage across and along the side of parking areas.

### **2. Parking and Loading Areas**

- a. Parking and garage entrances should be consistent with curb cuts limitations specified in Section III.C.2 Sidewalks and Curb Cuts.
- b. Whenever a site has frontage on more than one street, parking and garage entrances should be located on a secondary road or traveled way.
- c. Loading areas and service entrances should be located to the rear or side of the building, and adequate space and clearances should be provided for the maneuvering of trucks and delivery vehicles.



- d. Loading and dumpster areas should be screened from public view by landscape buffers, fences, walls, or a combination of them as specified in Section III.B.5 Buffering.

### **3. Bicycle Accommodations**

- a. Bicycle racks should be provided onsite at locations that may attract customers and visitors, such as the sidewalks in front of mixed-use buildings.
- b. Bicycle storage facilities for residents should be incorporated into the design of new residential and mixed-use buildings.
- c. Lighted bicycle paths or shared bicycle/pedestrian paths should be provided linking residential and mixed-use buildings to public spaces and onsite open spaces in developments with multiple buildings.

## **F. Site Infrastructure**

### **1. Lighting**

- a. Outdoor lighting should be designed to ensure proper illumination of the pedestrian network, and it should not cast glare onto streets, public ways, the sky, or onto adjacent properties.
- b. Outdoor illuminating devices, lighting practices, and systems which will minimize light pollution and conserve energy while maintaining reasonable nighttime safety and security should be employed.
- c. Site lighting should be set at a low luminaire height (bottom of fixture not higher than 12-14 feet for pedestrian areas, and 18-20 feet for parking lots).
- d. Light fixtures should be the "cut-off" variety, projecting all light down towards the pavement (less than 90 degrees from the vertical line).
- e. Decorative fixtures do not need to be the cut-off variety, but should be equipped with interior reflectors or shields to direct light at the desired target.
- f. The use of LED fixtures and solar-powered lights is encouraged.
- g. Flood and area lighting are discouraged.

### **2. Stormwater Management**

- a. Stormwater management measures for the site should conform to the best management practices described in the Commonwealth's Stormwater Management Handbooks, Volumes 1 and 2.



- b. Wherever practical, stormwater from roof surfaces of buildings should be infiltrated into the ground either by directing runoff to pervious areas, directing water to basins containing water treatment facilities, or through direct underground recharge. Development Projects may alternatively propose, at the option of the Applicant, the use of green roofs.
- c. Surface runoff should be directed into infiltration-based systems when feasible.
- d. Systems that deliver or may discharge water into the ground should be sufficient to treat said water and to monitor said treatment to achieve all applicable effluent standards of the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP).
- e. The design of rain gardens and bioswales as contributing landscape elements of the site drainage and stormwater management systems is encouraged.
- f. Plantings in bioswale retention areas should be well adapted to wetland edge environments, including grasses, sedges, shrubs, or trees that tolerate intermittent wet conditions and extended dry periods.

### **3. Underground Utilities**

- a. New site utilities (except stormwater and wastewater treatment facilities that require above grade access) should be installed underground.
- b. Underground electric boxes and other utility covers located outside of public streets should be flush with surface grade and located within sidewalks wherever possible.

## **G. Natural Features**

### **1. Protection of Slopes**

- a. Steep site slopes should be preserved in a natural, vegetated state to the extent practically feasible to prevent erosion and protect the natural habitat.
- b. On a site with slopes steeper than 15%, but less than 25%, new development should occupy only 60% of the slope area; the rest of the slope should be preserved in its natural state or restored with native plants or noninvasive adapted plants.
- c. On a site with slopes steeper than 25%, but less than 40%, new development should occupy only 40% of the slope area; the rest of



the slope should be preserved in its natural state or restored with native plants or noninvasive adapted plants.

- d. No development should occupy slopes steeper than 40%.

## **2. Protection of Vegetation**

- a. Existing trees, and healthy and mature trees that characterize portions of the neighborhood, should be preserved to the extent practical and feasible, and incorporated into the proposed site plan.
- b. Any existing mature tree that may be impacted through the project design should be replaced in kind, to the extent possible, or relocated within the site.

## **3. Best Management Practices**

- a. Existing trees to remain onsite should be protected from damage during site construction and staging, in accordance to commonly accepted best management practices (BMPs).
- b. New development should use construction period temporary BMPs, such as erosion and sedimentation control plans, noise reduction plans, etc. in accordance with DEP manuals and recommendations.