Suburban Town Center Development

Suburban towns have become increasingly interested in town center development across the country. In the Capital District, CDTC’s Linkage studies have helped several towns articulate plans to create town centers. Implementation of such initiatives is largely dependent upon private investment made in conjunction with development. A regional funding program would provide implementation resources for public infrastructure investment to direct and help steer development toward a form that builds community feel, creates “downtowns” and reduces the number of vehicle trips. It would be more pro-active than reactive. The development may include a mix of uses such as retail, office, residential, parks and public spaces at a walkable scale with a transportation system that is multi-modal, offers connected street systems, attractive landscaping and other amenities that enhance quality of life. Extensive consideration is given to bicycles and pedestrians. Town centers can be retrofits of existing built up commercial districts or can lay the groundwork for future development of currently undeveloped or underdeveloped areas.

A suburban town center development program in the Capital District could be pictured as one that would support public/private financing of local service roads parallel and perpendicular to arterials to create street systems in commercial or mixed-use “downtowns”. A “big initiative” of this type would permit implementation of many of the products of CDTC’s “Linkage” program at about five to ten lane miles of new town center streets per year. The total budget for this scale of effort would be about $175 M over twenty years at a unit cost of $1 M +/- per lane mile for a mix of two-lane access and collector roads. Private investment in commercial, retail and residential space at these centers would be substantially greater than the public road expenses. Much of the public expense could be recovered if the roads were to be built within a defined development district with a transportation fee, or if they were financed through mitigation fee structures. A public program with seed money to allow the road construction to precede and direct private development would be a “big initiative” that goes beyond a mitigation process.

Rationale: There is a strong regional consensus that suburban growth should be used to create stronger communities with a sense of place, mixed use development and walkability. This is reflected in many municipal comprehensive plans and CDTC Linkage study recommendations. Funding to put street infrastructure in place to direct the form of development is a key missing ingredient.