

only five miles south of the Mount Mourne area (see Figure 9.1). These and two other towns noted below are linked not only by the interstate but also by Highway 115 and the same future high-speed commuter rail line, all three transportation corridors paralleling each other in a north–south direction.

Cornelius is one of three contiguous towns that together comprise the northern portion of Mecklenburg County in North Carolina, the other two being Huntersville immediately to the south and Davidson sharing a boundary to the north. Together, the three towns cover a combined territory of approximately 80 square miles. At the heart of Mecklenburg County sits big city Charlotte, the heart of a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) of approximately two million people, of which, in 2003, about 55 000 lived in the three north Mecklenburg towns.

This case study documents the saga of the rebirth of this decrepit urban block into an active mixed-use center – the catalyst for the creation of a real town center where none had ever existed. But it also tells a larger story of regional collaborations between three towns in forging an unique example of Smart Growth and New Urbanist development that has gone largely unheralded in contemporary American town planning. This story also demonstrates, once again if proof were needed, the relevance and continuity of New Urbanist concepts of town planning from the scale of a region to a single urban block located at its core.

Forging a Regional Vision

In 1994, one of the authors received a phone call from a concerned citizen in the town of Davidson about a major thoroughfare that was planned to rip through the edge of town and disturb the quaint, small town character of that community. This was a familiar enough beginning – on either side of the Atlantic – for citizen activism to rise against thoughtless transportation planning that had little regard to adjacent patterns of land use or community character. A series of public protest meetings followed, where it became clear that the proposed road was only the symptom of a larger problem. The town of Davidson, a pleasant community 25 miles outside the major regional city of Charlotte simply had no effective means to manage the suburban sprawl that was heading inexorably its way.

All that the town possessed prior to 1994 was a standard zoning ordinance compiled from regulations

dating from the 1970s and which, if implemented, was guaranteed to produce sprawl. Davidson did however employ a dynamic young planner, Timothy Keane, who was acutely aware of the problem. Keane (who moved onward and upward a few years later to become Planning Director of Charleston, SC) persuaded the Town Board to appoint the architect author as town planning consultant, and together the pair explored the application of traditional town planning principles (in 1994 New Urbanism had not yet become the term of choice) to the town's development problems. In particular, we investigated how best to adapt coding examples like DPZ's famous Seaside Code to the challenges of managing growth in a full, public municipal context. An intensive, 12-month public process led to the adoption in 1995 of a new Land Plan for the town combined with a design-based code, pages from which were illustrated in Figure 3.4.

The same author was then appointed as town-planning consultant to neighboring Cornelius, with the charge of leading the town toward a similar growth management strategy. Work on a new town plan and zoning ordinance led to the appointment of two new staff members, Timothy Brown as Planning Director (now Planning Director of neighboring Mooresville, NC) and Craig Lewis as Assistant Town Manager (now a colleague of the authors in private practice). Between them these two newly appointed planners wrote the new Cornelius neotraditional zoning ordinance (adopted in 1996) while the author moved one town south to become planning consultant to the town of Huntersville. Working this time with Planning Director Ann Hammond (now Planning Director of Nashville and Davidson County, TN) the author helped craft a similar new town plan and zoning ordinance for that town, both of which were adopted late in 1996.

As part of this multi-year public process, the authors, working with community groups in all three towns, developed a large hand-drawn map of the anticipated build-out scenario for the whole of the northern part of Mecklenburg County covered by the jurisdictions of the three towns. Conceived originally as a public participation tool to educate the public and developers into the advantages of New Urbanist concepts by designing typical or contentious sites in detail, this map grew to a comprehensive vision of collaborative growth management. It featured extensive interconnected street and open space networks, transit village centers along the proposed commuter rail line to and from Charlotte, and

was backed up by compatible design-based and transit-supportive zoning across all three jurisdictions (see Plate 51). This collaborative civic regionalism was hailed in *The Charlotte Observer* as ‘the Mecklenburg Miracle,’ (Newsom, 1996) and featured briefly in an American PBS television documentary and companion book (Hylton, 2000).

As part of the detailed design exercises for key sites in the three towns, several students at the College of Architecture at the University of North Carolina worked with the architect author on illustrative projects, and one fifth-year student, Mick Campbell, produced a detailed urban design master plan for the old center of Cornelius in 1996. This plan showed the old manufacturing site redeveloped as a mixed-use town center with a new town hall, grocery store, retail shops and live-work units. In accordance with the early plans for transit in north Mecklenburg County, Campbell sited a new commuter train station directly adjacent to this town center, and on vacant land on the other side of the tracks laid out a transit-oriented development following New Urbanist guidelines (see Figure 11.2). This prescient scheme paralleled moves being made by the town for the redevelopment of its historic center.

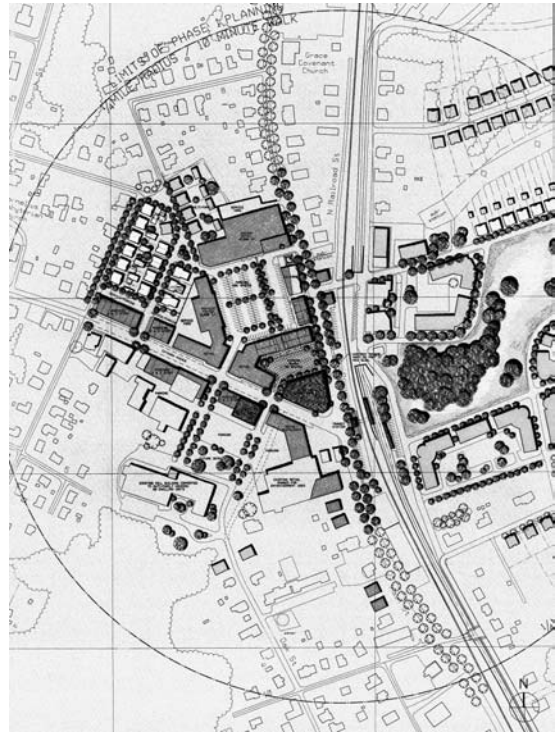


Figure 11.2 Cornelius Town Center, Student Thesis Project, 1996. As part of a continuing dialogue between the town of Cornelius and students at the UNC Charlotte College of Architecture, this design by Mick Campbell identified key themes for the redevelopment of the block: the main retail stores organized around a parking piazza within the block; smaller shops and apartments lining the streets; and a new town hall on the main corner opposite the future train station. Compare with Plate 52. (*Drawing courtesy of Mick Campbell*)

The Town Center and the Old Mill Site

The old town center of Cornelius was first identified as a potential commuter rail stop in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County’s 2025 Land Use and Transportation Plan, adopted in 1994. The previous year, architecture students from UNC Charlotte had responded to the town’s request by presenting development alternatives for the old mill site. Building on these twin initiatives, town officials, with guidance from the architect author, began more advanced conceptual studies for the redevelopment of the old town center and adjacent land as a transit-oriented urban village in 1995.

To advance its vision, and to stop heavy trucks from further degrading the old town center, the town had already rezoned the old mill property in 1993 to avoid its continued use for manufacturing or as a warehouse. The town also tried to purchase the 10-acre industrial site and in 1995, but were unsuccessful, and the civic plans were further thwarted by a private businessman who outbid the town and refurbished some of the buildings as warehouses in direct opposition to the town’s wishes. A complex legal battle ensued, which was initially won, against the odds, by the private owner on a zoning technicality. At one

point the owner even grazed goats on the property to establish some legal point! Despite this setback, Cornelius officials immediately threatened to appeal, and the consensus of legal opinion agreed the aberrant decision of the lower court jury would not likely be upheld under the more informed scrutiny of the appeal court. Accordingly, the owner settled out of court with the town and early in 1997, Cornelius eventually achieved ownership of the property (Brown, 2002).

During the ownership struggle, the town, with the architect author acting as planning consultant, had laid the planning groundwork for a new town center. Accordingly, in June 1997, a few months after the