

**APRIL 5, 2011 COMMENTARY ON 2003 VILLAGE PLANNING SUGGESTIONS**  
(by Nancy Greene, Chair Lopez Village Planning Review Committee *ad hoc*. Comments in brown.)

**1. Introduction**

This report provides a brief- user-friendly summary of the public process, the planning and design principles, and the most tangible product of the week-long Village Design Workshop which I conducted on Lopez Island at the request of, and under the auspices of, the County Planning Department during the week of June 23, 2003, with funding assistance from the Washington State Dept. of Community, Trade, and Economic Development.

**2. Public Process**

The public process extended over four days, the highlights of which are described below:

Monday: The process began on Monday afternoon with an orientation and a walking tour to familiarize me with the physical characteristics of the Village. That evening I conducted the first of two dual-image slide lectures, the subject on Monday being commercial development design principles.

Tuesday: On Tuesday morning village landowners and businesspeople participated in a discussion of issues of concern to them, particularly in the context of the previous evening's presentation. Following a lunch break, a second session was conducted during the afternoon, in which participants designed a conservation subdivision according to the four-step design process described and illustrated in several of my books. Following a dinner break the process resumed, with the second of my two dual-image slide presentations, this one focusing on residential development employing conservation design principles, both in low-density rural areas, and also in village infill situations.

Wednesday: The third day provided me with an opportunity to visit informally with a number of village landowners and businesspeople, including some who had attended Tuesday morning's session and a few who had not. Away from an official meeting atmosphere, I was able to connect with them better, listening carefully to hear their most pressing concerns, and to learn how they could see themselves participating in the development (or re-development) of key sites in the Island's center. I also met with a group of residents who were actively seeking to create housing for seniors, and walked the property they had targeted as the most likely location for that project.

Thursday: This day was set aside for me to bring together all the ideas I had gathered, and bring them to bear on the task of producing a map showing recommended building locations for helping the Village develop in a healthy fashion over the coming 25 years. Residents, landowners, and businesspeople were informed that they would be welcome, in manageable numbers, to meet with me as I integrated planning concepts and sketched out the village map, and quite a few of them did drop by my "office" in the Grace Episcopal Church Parish Hall to chat and to offer their perspectives. The latter part of the afternoon was consumed in the map preparation, prior to the third evening meeting in the Island Community Center, which began at 6 PM. That meeting was also very well-attended, and gave everyone present an opportunity to respond to the draft recommendations contained in my proposed Village Development Plan Map (which was projected onto a large screen on-stage). The discussion was extremely positive, suggesting a broad endorsement of my proposals, with several specific suggestions for further refinement, which I readily made to the map before leaving the Community Center that night.

**3. Planning and Design Principles**

The most important planning principle was to pro-actively invite the public to participate during all parts of the process. This went well beyond traditional advertising, and included direct outreach to key landowners and members of the village business community, including visiting them at their own places of business.

We are continuing this process by reaching out to these members of the community through individual contact and expanding our email list that notifies list members of our meetings and any documentation coming out of those meetings or correspondence with county officials.

The design principles are those described and illustrated in my books and publications. (The Committee

has a copy of *Rural by Design* for reference. (The commercial design principles are found in both *Rural by Design* and in *Smart Development for Quality Communities*. Residential design principles are from *Crossroads, Hamlet, Village, Town, Conservation Design for Subdivisions*, and *Growing Greener*.)

**Front Setbacks:** In both commercial and residential design, emphasis is placed on short front setbacks (maximum setbacks, or "build-to" lines). The importance of maintaining a traditional "street line" was a thread running through all my presentations.

This has been discussed in recent meetings and we are hoping to incorporate into our plan. To date, this has not been readily used by property developers on their own.

**Minimum Height and Mixed Uses:** The concept of "build-up" lines was introduced, requiring at least 1.5 stories, and encouraging two-story construction generally, with some at 2.5 stories for variety. With commercial development, the additional height provides an opportunity for mixed uses, which enable property owners to derive multiple incomes from the same building.

Slightly increasing building heights has received a favorable response. We are hoping to increase the maximum building height in the Village to 35 feet, so that mixed use is encouraged.

**Rear Parking and Above-Lot Residential:** On-lot parking was consistently recommended to be located at the rear of properties, and screened from the street if visible along side streets. Screening could take the form of low masonry walls (brick, stone, etc.) and hedges, supplemented by lines of canopy shade trees. Opportunities for constructing residential units above rear parking areas were also highlighted, again improving the return on the island's traditionally low ROI.

We are hoping to seriously limit any additional parking in the Village with the hope of providing more shared parking and encouraging a walkable village. Constructing residential units over rear parking areas seems to be an expensive option, and is a form that feels somewhat out of place in our small community.

**Shade Tree Planting:** One of the most important improvements was the systematic and consistent planting of canopy shade trees along village streets, in front of both businesses and residences, and along the public edges of park areas. Shade tree planting within parking lots is also very critical to the ambience of those larger paved areas. Such trees should be of multiple species to resist potential future blights, and should be of species capable of attaining a height of at least 50 feet (with a branch spread of at least 35 feet) upon maturity. Planting intervals should be no greater than 50 feet along both sides of every street.

Shade tree planting was discussed in light of protecting long views – either uphill or to the water. The Committee felt that some well-placed shade trees, but not to the extent mentioned, would work better to help protect cherished views. We've discussed using a handful of tree types for planting that would give us the opportunity for a range of heights and spreads.

**Residential "Detached Townhouses":** As an alternative to attached townhouses (where daylighting and ventilation is limited to narrow front and back walls), homes can be constructed on lots as narrow as 27-30 feet. Homes on such lots would vary from 18-22 feet in width, and be located on one side lot line, with the two side yards combined on the opposite side of the house. That combined side yard is typically decked over and to provide commodious, private outdoor sitting areas (screened both front and rear by low privacy fences typically 42" tall). Such decks are accessed by one or more sliding glass doors from living rooms and family rooms, and privacy from the nextdoor house is assured by designing them only with clerestory windows on the side bordering their neighbor's deck. Such townhouses are more livable than attached homes due to their much greater daylighting, ventilation, and private outdoor deck areas. They are also reportedly less expensive to build, compared with attached-wall homes, due to the high cost of constructing firewalls between attached units.

The particulars of housing have not been adequately discussed to know whether this type of lot layout will be encouraged or not. We have one owner in the Village with 28 small lots where this might be applicable. The owner has not current plans to develop due to economic climate. We also need to revise

the zoning in the Village to create more residential opportunities.

**Pedestrian Connections:** The Village's existing footpath network should be expanded at every opportunity to link all neighborhoods, businesses, parks, and civic buildings. The current paths at Morgantown and Coho are good examples of the less formal approach. That could be supplemented by more formal paths connecting parking lots, as well as by regular sidewalk provision along the Village's principal streets, so that pedestrians will no longer have to share the Village streets with cars, trucks, and SUVs.

This is a key and popular element for our community. The recently formed Lopez Community Trails Network group has been working in the Village to create at least one key pathway connecting senior housing to the medical clinic. In addition, the committee has developed an overview of connections that we hope to incorporate into our plan.

**Vistas:** Existing vistas from public thoroughfares to the water should be preserved by siting new or replacement buildings in a manner that such views will not be blocked. This can be accomplished by building at higher intensity (in multi-story structures) on one part of the property, leaving the other part (with the public view) undisturbed.

As mentioned above, this is an important (and popular) element for incorporation into our plan.

**Stormwater:** Stormwater should be viewed as the precious resource it is. Runoff from new buildings should be collected and filtered for use by residents, and runoff from streets and parking lots should be directed into a new system of "rain gardens" (or "bio-retention areas") designed not only to recharge the local aquifer and groundwater supplies, but also to add further touches of natural beauty to the village scene. Further information on rain garden design can be found at the website of the Center for Watershed Protection ([www.cwp.org](http://www.cwp.org)).

Most recently SJ County Public Works completed "improvements" to Fisherman Bay Road and expanded and altered the drainage system in the Village. The committee hoped to create an open swale / rain garden / water feature as part of this project, but was too late to have any impact. This is an expensive and somewhat controversial plan component for us. The move and expansion of the new grocery store has created significant run-off that was handled by meeting minimum requirements. The end result is that our Village stormwater management is less than satisfactory, and it will take a long time to organize and implement.

**Land Treatment:** The concept of "land treatment" for wastewater disposal was discussed, again to help recharge the island's diminishing aquifer. This fully treated wastewater is another resource that is currently discarded into the Sound, for lack of funds to modernize the sewage treatment operations. The land treatment system is described in *Rural by Design*, and can take the form of either spray irrigation or drip irrigation (commonly used in golf courses around the country, especially in the arid Southwest).

Fisherman Bay Sewer District board members and staff have been working very hard to upgrade and maintain its facility. Attached is a report produced in part by staff member Geoff Holmes on the upgrade and its success. They continue to tweak the process.

#### **4. Specific Planning Recommendations (on the Village Development Map)**

A number of specific recommendations are illustrated on the Village Development Map. Before describing them briefly, one should note that this is concept for a gradual fleshing-out of the Village over the next 25 years. For this reason, the drawing should ideally take the form of 25 clear mylar sheets, each with a few new or replacement buildings shown on it, representing typical increments of annual change.

Another important point that should be emphasized is that the principal purpose of this map was to illustrate planning principles generally, and not to indicate specific building configurations for individual properties. Those principles are described above (maintaining street lines, keeping buildings close to streets, locating parking to the rear and sides, planting shade trees at regular intervals virtually everywhere, and continuing the tradition of pedestrian circulation *via* footpaths

and sidewalks).

One of the principal purposes of the map was to stimulate further public discussion by residents, business people, and property owners. That discussion should be ongoing, and the map should be viewed as a living document that should be updated at least every year as a guide for channeling positive change.

The map has been used often as a reference. During our committee meetings and workshops, we often check the map to see what solutions were suggested. Many of them are still appropriate. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of this is to re-zone the Village so that areas can be set aside as specifically residential (like the areas on the other side of Fisherman Bay Road.)

Among the main recommendations illustrated on that map are:

**Redeveloping the Village Grocery Site:** After the village grocery relocates, the current site should be redeveloped according to the basic design principles described above. The new building should be located very close to the street with rear parking, possibly partly decked with residential units above some of the parking spaces. The building should be at least 1.5 stories, if not two stories in height, as one of the main structures on the Village's principal streets.

A two-story mixed use, more dense development with open space connecting to the street north of the site is preferred. Current owners, who own both the new market and this site, are wishing to keep the parking lot and building, hoping to develop it into a gym and some type of children-related activities center. Clean up of toxic dirt contaminated by gas storage leakage is on going. This site has generated a great deal of community interest, but may not generate much activity for a while.

**New Grocery Store:** The site proposed for the new grocery store has already been purchased by the business owner. Because the parcel is not deep enough to be fully lined with commercial buildings along both its fronts, I have suggested that the large grocery building (15,000 - 20,000 sq. ft.) front onto Village Road, with parking behind. That parking would be partly screened from Weeks Road by two smaller buildings, supplemented by hedges and shade trees. Signage and display windows would be close to the street, for maximum visibility.

The new market fronts on Weeks Road with its loading dock facing the Community Center. The store Parking is not screened and the entrances to the store are accessed on foot through the parking lots. Landscaping around the store is minimal, as required by County ordinance.

**New Cross Street:** This proposed short, new street (which could in fact be named "Cross Street"), is badly needed for vehicular circulation. It would also provide a convenient vehicular entrance to the rear parking behind the new grocery store.

Residents of the senior hamlet rejected the idea for a street. A few drivers use the grocery store parking lot to connect between Village and Weeks Road.

**Detached Townhouses:** I have proposed 10-12 detached townhouses on the adjacent site, on the opposite side of the new Cross Street. This property is not needed for further commercial expansion within the foreseeable future, while additional village housing is a much larger unmet need. It is also possible that this small project could be integrated into efforts to provide senior housing within walking distance of business and community facilities in the village center.

This project has been completed, much as shown on the map. The "cottages" are primarily one-story duplexes with a large common outdoor area and gathering building. Also included is an adult family home with six rooms and common areas. [www.lopezhamlet.com/](http://www.lopezhamlet.com/)

**"Gateway" Buildings:** I have proposed a new commercial and mixed-use building at the upper end of the village, on the corner of Weeks Road and Fisherman Bay Road. I believe it is important to set the tone of the village at its entrance. A building that is at least 1.5 stories (possibly two stories) in height would also help to screen the unattractive light green addition on the otherwise fine large barn-like structure currently housing an auto repair business. (Simply painting the light

green addition to match the dark red of the barn to which it is attached would help enormously to down-play the odd angles of that addition. Another way to mitigate the awkwardness of the light green addition would be to enlarge the green-sided area so that the single-pitched "wings" become double-pitched in a more traditional manner. Painting the entire building dark red would again be recommended.) Even if that existing building were perfect architecturally, its setback within the center of the large lot creates an inappropriate tone for an entrance to a traditional village, and the new gateway building at the street edge would still be recommended.

Gateway buildings are still seen as a possibility, but current economic conditions are limiting and no change is seen in the foreseeable future.

**Pedestrian Links:** The map shows several new or amplified pedestrian links, both through parking lots and open space areas, and along streets (sidewalks).

The links have been revised, but are an important element in the future of the Village. Recently the County added a sidewalk of permeable concrete along Fisherman Bay Road. This walkway, set apart from the road by a grass strip, is being used by a wide range of people. Another walkway (raised gravel) connecting the bank and the post office is also facilitating pedestrian connections.

**Shade Trees:** The map is very clear that canopy shade tree planting at regular intervals along both sides of village streets is strongly recommended to provide cohesiveness to the village, and to make it an even more attractive place in which to live, walk, and do business.

See Shade Trees above.

**PUD Park:** This area badly needs help, not only from a design standpoint, but from a long-term maintenance perspective. In the short term it is recommended that maintenance be taken over by a group of organizations (possibly including the chamber of commerce, local service groups, the garden club, the master gardeners, 4-H, and the community land trust). The existing PUD property owners should not have been saddled with the sole responsibility of maintaining a central open space which is so clearly a community resource and a potential amenity for the enjoyment of all. If the park is properly planted and then well-maintained for several years, the tending organizations would be in better position to request that the County agree to acquire it for \$1 and to incorporate it into its public parks system.

The park was purchased by San Juan County Parks in 2008 and is being maintained by the Lopez Chamber of Commerce. County Parks does not have the funds to maintain the facility. The Chamber has made some improvements to the park, adding and simplifying a small landscape component, doing some restoration work on the water tower and adding a few picnic tables. Each year the site hosts a lunch for a bicycle tour of Lopez (April) and a winter parade after Thanksgiving.

**Water Views:** The outstanding public view of the water at the end of Village Road should be preserved. The first choice would be to avoid any building at all on that open space, but that outcome would require either a significant donation by the current owner, a purchase of his development rights by the County or the land trust, or a land swap for other lands in the village (or on other parts of the island) -- or a combination of the above. If none of this can be accomplished, development should be designed so that the main view from Village Road would not be obstructed by future buildings. This could be achieved by arranging any new buildings on other parts of the parcel, and allowing those buildings to be larger (and taller) to compensate for the land left open.

Conservation of this parcel is a high priority for the community. The owner understands the value to the community, but is not open at this time to discussing an easement or purchase. The County's Land Bank has the parcel on a list of possible purchases should the owner change his mind.

