
POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR STRIP COMMERCIAL AND MIXED-USE DEVELOPMENT

Context

The Hillsborough County City-County Planning Commission is preparing updates to the comprehensive plans for Tampa, Temple Terrace, Plant City, and unincorporated Hillsborough County.

In March 2014, the Planning Commission engaged Dover, Kohl & Partners and Spikowski Planning Associates to identify approaches that could improve the way these plans discourage strip commercial development and encourage (or more effectively encourage) mixed-use development.

Strip commercial development in its post-World War II form is the most common pattern for new stores, restaurants, and service businesses. This pattern is often unsightly, it adversely affects adjoining neighborhoods, and it causes congestion on adjoining highways.

Stretching for miles in what seems to be an undifferentiated landscape of signs, driveways, parking lots and cheap buildings, the American commercial strip is one of the most exasperating and yet ubiquitous urban forms ever created. Occurring in nearly every settlement of any size in the country, the strip is everywhere the same and everywhere an eyesore.

--- Brenda Case Scheer

Until the 1950s, mixed-use development didn't have a name because most development didn't segregate large expanses of land into pods restricted to a single use. It wasn't unusual for blocks to be dedicated to one use, but proximity and easy access to complementary uses was taken for granted. This time-honored development pattern has been replaced in new communities by rigid separation of uses and severe limitations on access. Segregated-use communities have become so ubiquitous that buyers of new homes have little choice if they prefer a different kind of neighborhood.

Suburban planning is all about separation and segregation of uses. Buffers, enormous setbacks, masking. And the high speeds necessitated by such design. Urban planning, by stark contrast, strives for mixed and shared use, permeability, modest speeds, and compact dimensions.

--- Dom Nozzi

Prior Documents

This assignment's initial task resulted in two reports that identified a wide variety of methods that other communities use in comprehensive plans to discourage or repair strip commercial development and to encourage mixed-use development. These other communities included six Florida counties, one Florida city, and three counties and cities outside Florida. These reports are available from the Hillsborough County-County Planning Commission or can be reviewed on-line at _____.

This Document

This document proposes a policy framework for the Hillsborough County City-County Planning Commission to use in preparing updates to the four comprehensive plans.

This policy framework begins with a narrative description of new approaches to strip commercial and mixed-use development, followed by specific suggestions as to how those approaches could be carried out. Examples are then provided that illustrate the application of these approaches.

This policy framework will be reviewed and critiqued by planning commission and city/county staff in early June.

Once the final policy framework has been finalized, the consulting team will draft policy language that can be considered by the Planning Commission and the four local governments that it serves. Policy language will be completed by mid-July of 2014.

GENERAL POLICY DIRECTION

The state of Florida now allows communities greater latitude in deciding how to shape a healthy and prosperous future. Recent changes to state law and the comprehensive-plan review process means that many regulations that state action had forced into comprehensive plans can be improved, relaxed, removed, or moved into codes.

The segregated-use nature of future land use maps is still enshrined in state law, but all indications are that local governments now have more flexibility to support the creation and revitalization of compact and diverse mixed-use communities.

The Tampa region is a sophisticated and thriving urban center which, through its unique public planning structure, can take immediate advantage of this opportunity to upgrade its four comprehensive plans in a coordinated way.

Hillsborough County and its cities can leverage many assets during this process:

- Their renewed commitment to making the region more attractive to visitors and businesses
- Their recent experience in urban, suburban and rural planning
- Their closely linked MPO and city-county comprehensive planning organization

These comprehensive plan upgrades should set the stage for subsequent land development code amendments. These upgrades should also guide how community plans are created and implemented.

Strip commercial corridors

Important streets are often lined on each side with a row of stores, offices, and restaurants. This pattern has always been successful along Main Streets, and later became standard and highly desirable along streetcar routes. This pattern becomes problematic when replicated along high-speed roads because each business has its own parking lot for customers who all arrive by car.

Today's common strip-commercial pattern is not the inevitable pattern for all suburban arterial roads. Wide suburban roads can become much more than commercially-lined conduits for through traffic.

Most corridors are composed of distinct centers of activity separated by segments of lower-intensity uses. These differences are healthy and should be encouraged in order to provide varying levels of activity and character along the corridor.

Corridor zoning should be organized by center and segment. A wide range of nonretail uses can be accommodated, including housing, hotels, offices, civic uses, and cultural, entertainment, and recreational activities.

As development pressures increase, the character of these corridors should densify and diversify, and mixed-use development should become an essential part of this change. This will add new life to the corridor, bring new services, create a more lively human dimension, and reinforce a sense of place. A secondary street pattern will often be needed to make local circulation convenient.

In the post-strip suburban city, it is easier for corridor frontages to attract value by integrating with the neighborhoods they border than by trying to compete with far-away crossroads properties for shoppers and retail investors.

--- Restructuring the Commercial Strip

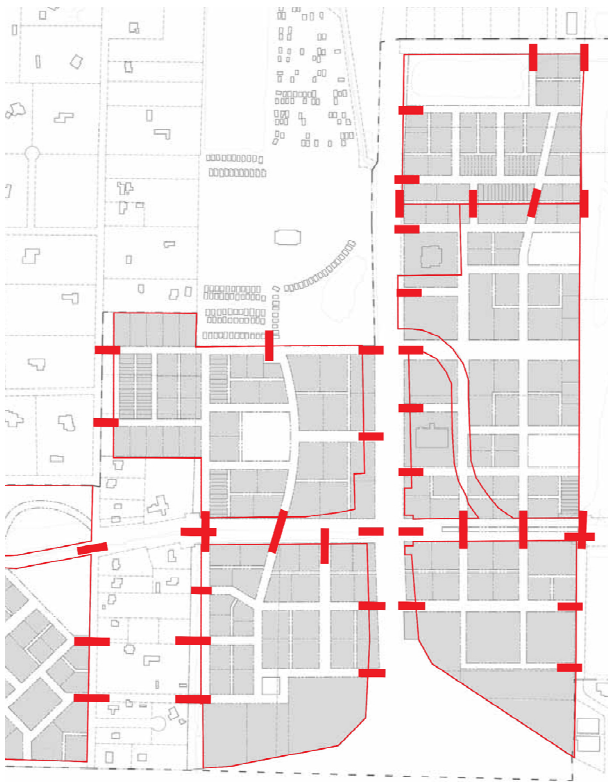
Transit works best where there are many destinations along a fairly straight line. Many suburban strips have this character, along with the potential for intensification that is needed to support frequent transit service. Transit thus has an important role in healing the most troublesome features of at least some suburban roads, re-creating them as humane and functional places where shopping, entertainment, walking, cycling and transit all have adequate space alongside private cars.

Major intersections of suburban roads can become transit transfer points that support higher-intensity mixed-use neighborhoods that would provide unparalleled accessibility for suburban residents who don't wish to drive everywhere or don't own a car.

Mixed-use development

In many ways, society provides heretofore unimaginable choices about how and where local residents can work, live, and play. Yet despite the widest variety of cars being available today, those who choose to walk, bike, or use public transit have very few choices. Despite the fierce competition among national homebuilders to produce homes with wide public appeal, those who prefer traditional neighborhoods with sidewalks and places to walk find that today's choices are in fact extremely narrow. Despite the bruising competition among national retailers to cater to every taste, most stores being built are isolated from walkable neighborhoods, requiring car trips even for daily needs.

Many of these factors are outside the influence of local government, but some factors are abetted by comprehensive plan policies or land development code regulations that can be modified to create a better future for Hillsborough County. Perhaps more important is reversing the near-universal abandonment by local governments of a meaningful role in configuring the essential connections within and between adjoining development tracts – mainly street networks, but also surface water flows and trails.



Site plan emphasizing connections

Planned development rezoning

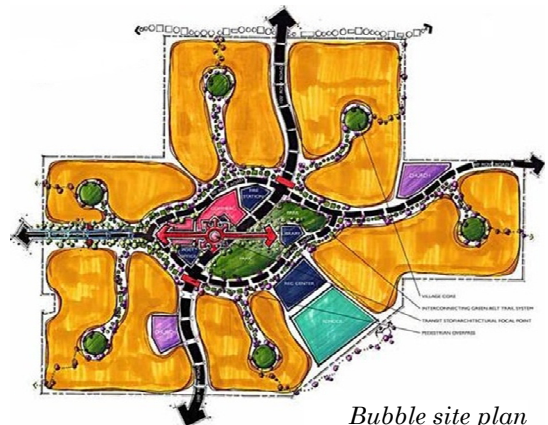
The time has come to reconsider the practice of planning newly developing areas through isolated site-specific “planned development” rezonings. That practice evolved because landowners have financial incentives to achieve zoning that is commensurate with the development potential specified in comprehensive plans, and planned-development rezoning is often a requirement or preferred approach.

Planned development zoning, with its site plans and special conditions, seems like a reasonable approach to this end, but its many pitfalls must also be acknowledged.

From the public’s perspective, planning becomes a never-ending series of lengthy public hearings managed by paid experts that frequently take place after site plans and other details have already been solidified by applicants and staff.

From the government side, this process isolates the discussion to individual sites, foregoing the opportunity to plan essential factors such as the street network that should extend beyond that site.

From the landowners’ side, the process works when development is imminent and the required site plan and special conditions respond to a serious development proposal. When development isn’t imminent, landowners are still required to propose site plans and development concepts even though they may not resemble how the property will ultimately be developed. The use of “bubble plans” – intended to preserve some amount of flexibility for developers to meet future market conditions and undiscovered design constraints – can result in unpredictable built results from the government and community perspective.



Bubble site plan

Overall, the planned-development rezoning process has become costly and contentious, with uncertain outcomes. Even a successful zoning outcome isn't useful when the approved development concept is later revised, making the hard-sought zoning suddenly obsolete.

Even when a zoning outcome is successful, fundamental questions often have not been resolved about how the development site is integrated into or separated from the surrounding environment, how the local street network will connect to adjoining development tracts, and how special zoning conditions can restrict the ability for neighborhoods and buildings to evolve over time – an obvious risk when pre-development concepts are frozen into zoning approvals.

Moving toward a better future

The first wave of better planning that discourages strip commercial and promotes mixed-use development can be initiated in the upcoming revisions to all four comprehensive plans.

Essential aspects of this first wave include:

- (1) Move unnecessary regulations out of comprehensive plans. Regulations that are still useful can be moved into land development codes, where most regulations belong.
- (2) Create consistent terminology to be used among all four comprehensive plans, beginning with clear definitions for basic terms like “strip commercial” and “mixed use.” This consistent terminology should extend to broader terms for potential transit corridors and centers of commercial and civic activity.
- (3) Improve the way that rezonings are evaluated for comprehensive plan consistency, for instance refined by differing physical contexts (such as urban/suburban/rural) in place of abstract yet broadly applied numerical criteria.
- (4) Include policies that identify additional ways that comprehensive plans can be refined to address these same issues, for instance identifying future government actions rather than merely responding to development proposals.
- (5) Experiment with systems that can identify how the future local and collector street network will be interconnected despite actual development taking place at different times and accommodating different uses.

- (6) Since future land use maps may still be subject to state rules that promote used-based land use designations with clearly defined density caps, each jurisdiction can make greater use of vision or character maps that serve as planning overlays:
 - (a) These maps can illustrate critical physical attributes or planning concepts that can be coordinated among jurisdictions despite their very different underlying future land use maps.
 - (b) These maps can become a vehicle for coordinating locally derived community plans by establishing a common vocabulary to identify centers of commercial and civic activity and stable versus transitioning areas.
 - (c) These maps could also identify areas such as specific corridors or neighborhoods where in-depth planning should be undertaken to meet clearly stated goals (such as corridor revitalization or employment-rich mixed-use districts). This in-depth planning would result in changes to land development regulations to implement the plans.

SPECIFIC POLICY DIRECTION

Commercial Corridors

The following specific approaches should be considered for discouraging strip commercial development in Hillsborough County:

1. **Move the current commercial locational policies away from a quantitative approach** of precise square footages and distances from intersections, toward policies that define the desired outcomes and describe how they can be made easier to accomplish.
 - a. New policies could differentiate between rural, suburban, and urban locations.
 - b. New policies could differentiate between stable developed areas versus undeveloped or transitioning areas.
 - c. New policies could differentiate between areas with existing parallel streets; where parallel streets could be built; and where they cannot be built.
 - d. New policies should be clear about where and when they would be applied, and about what kind of implementing regulations might be required.
2. **Make a clear distinction between desirable commercial concentrations near major intersections and the link/segments/connections between those intersections.** This distinction could be carried out in various ways:
 - a. New policies could be more positive than negative (instead of focusing on what landowners cannot do between the intersections, the policies would describe what landowners can and should do between the intersections).
 - b. Comprehensive plan residential densities could be raised between the major intersections, perhaps limited to suitable building types and site designs.
 - c. New policies could authorize the land development code (LDC) to include simple regulating plans that show a secondary street network that would support retail and mixed-use concentrations at intersections and other uses along arterials between intersections.

- i. As an incentive, land subject to these regulating plans (at or between the intersections) could qualify for rezoning by the county or cities, instead of making landowners apply individually.
- ii. New policies could explain what these regulating plans would depict and how and when they would be adopted and applied.

Mixed-Use Development

The following specific approaches should be considered for promoting mixed-use development in Hillsborough County:

3. **Move mixed-use policies away from a quantitative approach** of precise floor-area-ratio caps and rigid percentages of different uses, toward policies that define the desired outcomes and describe how they can be made easier to accomplish.
 - a. New policies could differentiate between new self-contained mixed-use developments and the more common situation where mixed uses can/should occur in close proximity and interconnected, but may not be created by one master developer.
 - b. New policies could differentiate between stable developed areas versus undeveloped or transitioning areas.
 - c. New policies should be clear about where and when they would be applied, and about what kind of implementing regulations might be required.
4. **Reconsider the reliance on future land use map (FLUM) categories that specify a single use or narrow range of uses.** Move toward character/context categories grouped into a rural/suburban/urban hierarchy that can be directly linked to transportation planning.
5. **In FLUM categories promoting mixed uses:**
 - a. Focus on the essentials of urbanism such as small blocks that are conducive to uses that will vary over time as economic and social conditions evolve.
 - b. Commit to removing regulatory obstacles to urban development, such as requiring parking and stormwater on each site, and

requiring suburban buffers or open-space requirements in urban settings.

6. Reconsider density caps in existing FLUM categories.

7. Encourage new mixed-use developments to use form-based coding techniques instead of bubbled “planned development” concept plans.

Both Issues

The following specific approaches should also be considered to assist with both issues:

8. Include general policies about desirable design features for commercial and mixed-use areas, addressing for instance:

- a. Importance of local street connectivity, instead of relying on single entrances, with policies such as:
 - i. Streets should connect to other streets. Dead-end streets would only be permitted where physical constraints such as highways, sensitive natural resources, or unusual topography provide no alternatives.
 - ii. Street stubs should be provided to adjoining parcels to accommodate future street connectivity.
 - iii. A continuous network of rear and side alleys or lanes should serve as the primary means of vehicular ingress to individual lots in urban contexts.
 - iv. Parcels in urban contexts that face auto-oriented thoroughfares (particularly those four or more lanes wide) should incorporate a side access lane when possible as part of future redevelopment, to provide a walkable sidewalk and slow-moving street frontage for new buildings.
- b. Benefits of shared facilities (such as driveways and parking spaces). In urban contexts, minimum parking requirements on individual lots can be reduced or eliminated to encourage redevelopment of constrained parcels.
- c. Importance of walkability to support transit, healthy living, walking between stores, and safe travel. Policies in urban contexts could include:

- i. Building facades facing streets or public spaces should include doors and windows; blank walls would be prohibited.

- ii. The front façade of mixed-use buildings should be located at the back edge of a sidewalk or directly facing a public park or plaza; parking should be located to the side or rear of the building.

- iii. Mixed-use buildings should protect pedestrians with awnings, balconies, colonnades, or arcades along at least 50% of the front building façade.

- d. Best methods of implementing the design features (improved land development regulations that may include overlay district and form-based codes).

9. Provide incentives for development proposals with small blocks and with through streets spaced at least every ¼ mile.

10. Expand the use of vision or community character maps in each plan.

- a. These maps could differentiate between stable developed areas versus undeveloped or transitioning areas.
- b. Priority redevelopment corridors and/or future transit corridors could be identified, with policies that describe what could/should happen there.
- c. Temple Terrace and Plant City could map their downtowns and intersections where commercial and mixed-use concentrations are desired.
- d. Arterials and other streets that qualify for commercial could be shown (replacing the current reliance on functional classification maps created for other purposes).
- e. Urban centers (existing and proposed) could be identified, with policies that describe what could/should happen there.

11. Organize new policies using a common format and vocabulary, distinguishing between policies and strategies.

- a. Policies are statements of intent and general direction that a city or county sets to meet its goals and objectives; policies direct the manner in which actions and decisions should be made.

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- i. Some policies provide guidance for making decisions on rezoning applications.
 - ii. Other policies are statements of design intent.
 - b. Strategies are the specific actions, techniques, or programs that a city or county will implement to achieve objectives and policies and solve issues and problems.
 - i. Some strategies direct other county or city actions (LDC changes; special studies; overlay districts; etc.).
 - ii. Other strategies identify incentives that can be provided to encourage other parties to follow some desired path.
 - c. Most regulations belong in the LDC, not the comprehensive plan, but some such as residential density are required by the state to be in comprehensive plans.

EXAMPLES

Corridor Infill in South Miami

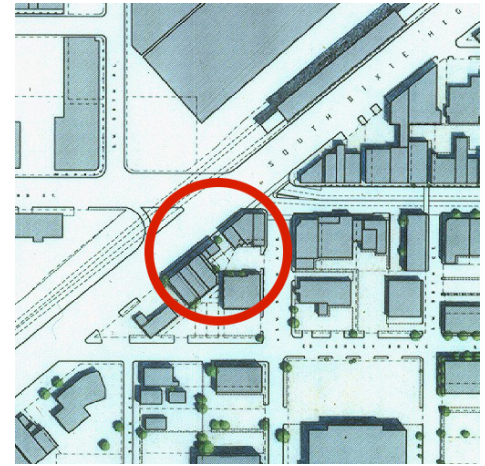
The Amster Building is an example of a small increment of mixed-use infill on a shallow lot made possible through a change in the land development regulations.

This area of South Miami has a number of small lots that front the primary north-south corridor (US 1). This parcel was unbuildable under the previous zoning, which required parking to be provided on each lot. In 1992 a form-based code was adopted for South Miami's downtown; among other changes, the new code allows for shared parking and transit-proximity parking reductions, allowing small lots such as this to be developed.

The code also requires new development to be pedestrian-friendly and contribute to a connected downtown commercial district. For example, it requires buildings to be located at the back of the

sidewalk (with any on-site parking to the rear), and doors and windows (not blank walls) to face the street. The Amster Building was the first "main street" type building constructed on US-1 in over 50 years.

*Right:
Existing
Conditions,
1992*



*Below:
The Amster
Building on
US 1*



Mixed-Use Development in Atlanta

Atlanta's Edgewood retail district, located about three miles east of downtown, provides an example of national big-box retailers fitting into a walkable urban center following a master plan and form-based design principles.

The national tenant mix found here is similar to what can be found in Hillsborough County:

- Target
- Lowe's
- Best Buy
- Bed Bath & Beyond
- Barnes & Noble
- Kroger
- Ross
- Office Depot,

What is different is design. The urban form prioritizes the needs of pedestrians on the street side, with buildings lining the back of wide sidewalks, street trees separating pedestrians from moving vehicles, and awnings and canopies providing shelter from the elements. Parking is located to the rear, in both surface lots and structures.

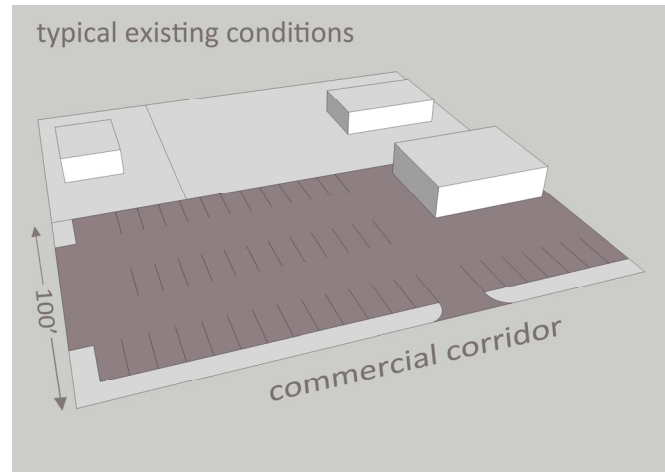
On the main street, shopfront buildings with upper stories contain office, retail, and residences. There are also new residential buildings on side streets which transition to adjacent neighborhoods.



Ideas for Shallow Lots in Tampa

In the City of Tampa, several of the commercial corridors studied have shallow (100' deep) lots that constrain redevelopment options. In midblock areas, new multifamily housing or mixed-use buildings would often be a desirable alternative standard commercial buildings.

Housing developers often hesitate to face their buildings onto an auto-oriented corridor. The following diagrams show a few options for mixed-use or residential building types that fit this condition. New policies could specify building and site design techniques that create desirable frontages for new residences even on shallow lots.



1. **Buildings Fronting on a Semi-Public Space.** New buildings can be oriented so that a majority of units front a small green space introduced as part of the site design, with the narrow end of the buildings facing the street.

Two site design options are shown on the diagrams at right – buildings flanking a new green (top) and an L-shaped building creating a new courtyard space to the front (bottom).

In both cases, parking is located to the side rather than front of buildings. A low wall or hedge should be used to shield the view of parked cars from the sidewalk. Parking should be planned in coordination with adjacent lots so that drive aisles can be shared, for efficiency as well and to minimize curb cuts from the main corridor. In some cases it may also be possible to “park under” the rear of the building utilizing a private drive or alley between the rear property line and the building.



2. **Buildings Fronting on Side Access Lane.** A side access lane with one lane of slow moving traffic, on-street parking, street trees and a wide sidewalk could be added to adjoining lots to provide a pedestrian-friendly frontage for new buildings.

This option creates a shallower buildable area; parking can be accommodated under or at the first floor of the building to maximize usable floor space. At the first floor, design standards should require parking to be screened and architecturally treated. Regulations could require small vertical openings oriented similar to building windows, and parking accessed from the side or rear rather than from the front street, ensuring that a walkable street frontage would be continued, as shown in these photos from Winter Park. With a deeper lot, usable space should occupy the first floor facing the street, even with “tuck under” parking in the rear.

Some buildable area that would be “lost” because of the access lane may be recaptured by utilizing square footage above a colonnade over the sidewalk. Removing or thinning the sidewalk in the public right-of-way is a way to increase the landscaped area (as the sidewalk is now provided on the lot, between the access lane and building).



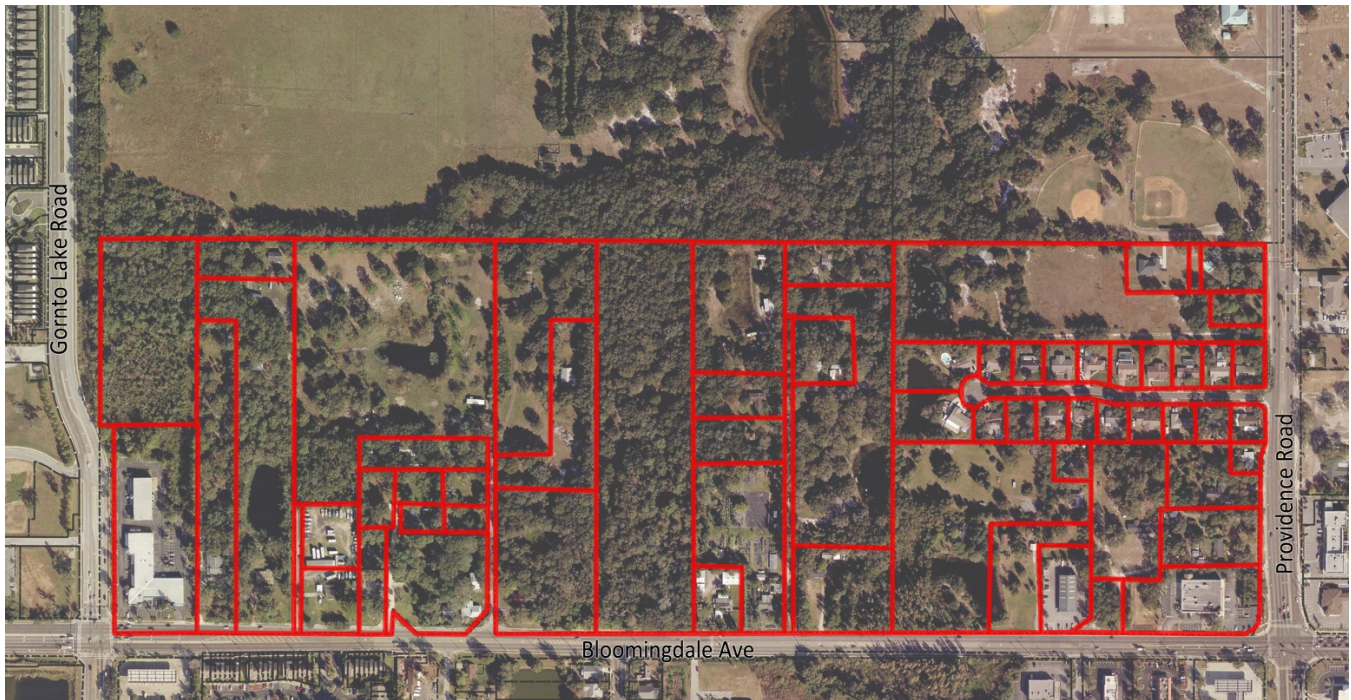
Using Regulating Plans to Achieve Better Commercial Corridors

Regulations that coordinate and shape the form of future development are critical for achieving connected, mixed-use urban forms. This is especially true along commercial corridors and other locations with multiple property owners.

One way this has been done in other communities is by adopting a regulating plan that shows where new street connections should go and where a mixture of uses is expected. Typically this happens as a result of a planning process that involves input from municipal staff, property owners, and the community.

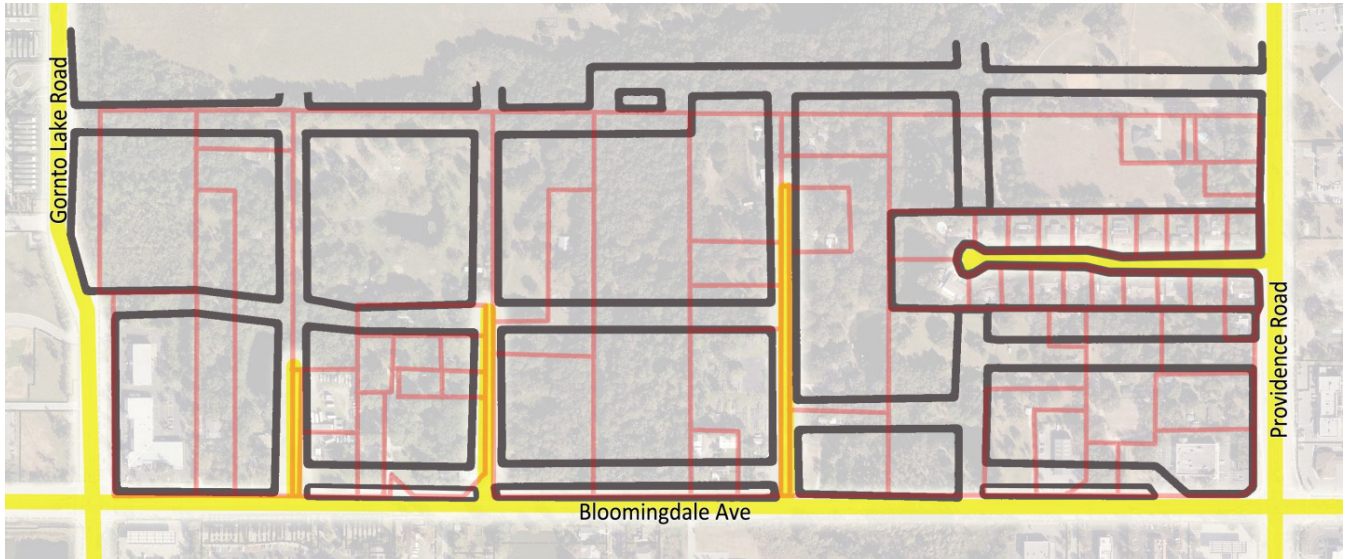
The diagrams on the next page show how this technique could be applied in Hillsborough County. An actual condition was chosen with multiple property owners where the typical pattern might be a series of individual requests for commercial zoning that would result in another commercial strip. See aerial photograph below.

(NOTE: These diagrams should be viewed as an example of application of this technique, not as a specific master plan for this area. Input from property owners, the community, and planning staff would be needed to test these concepts.)



Above, existing conditions, Hillsborough County. A major east-west corridor is located on the south side. This particular segment is largely undeveloped on the north side; having regulations in place to guide future development before applications are submitted could help to ensure a walkable, connected pattern instead of a typical commercial strip.

The diagram below shows how existing streets (highlighted in yellow) can be extended, and new cross streets added to create a walkable street grid. By locating future street locations before new development is designed, individual property owners can develop as market conditions allow and set the stage for future connectivity as other parcels are added to the mix. (Existing parcels are shown in red; and new potential rights-of-way are in grey.)



The illustrative plan below shows the location of new street connections and also denotes the intensity of new development. Darker shades indicate a higher intensity and mixing of uses, generally near major intersections. Lighter shades indicate less intensity and little or no mixing of uses. Preserve areas are shown where existing stormwater ponds are found; additional green open spaces are shown on the plan to form a connected network throughout the district rather than being a percentage of “left-over” space on each lot.



Mixed-use Planning in Sarasota

Sarasota County is experimenting with a coordinated development strategy for 322 acres immediately east of I-75 at the Fruitville Road interchange. The planning area includes five privately owned tracts and one county-owned tract.

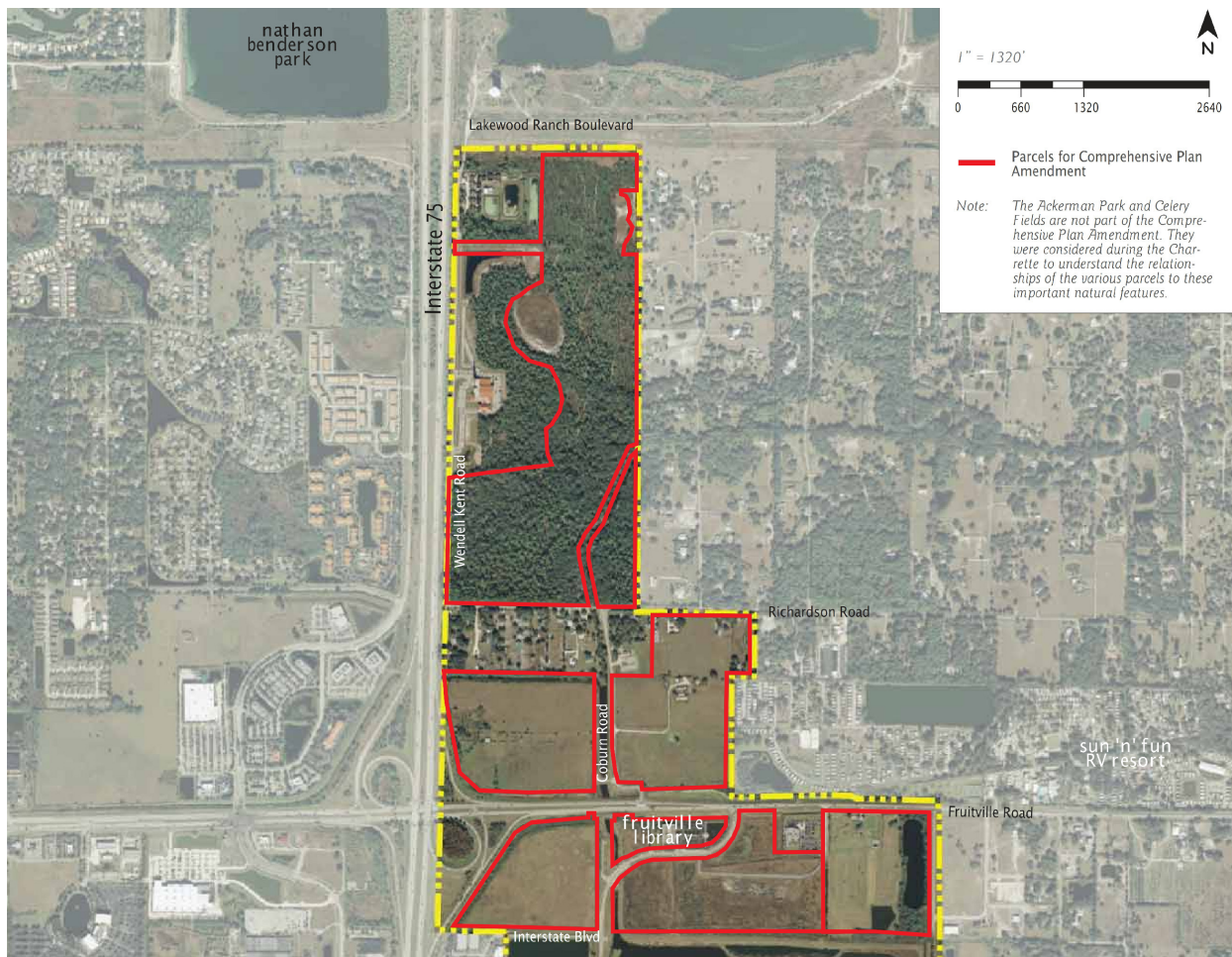
The planning area shares a number of characteristics with major development tracts in Hillsborough County:

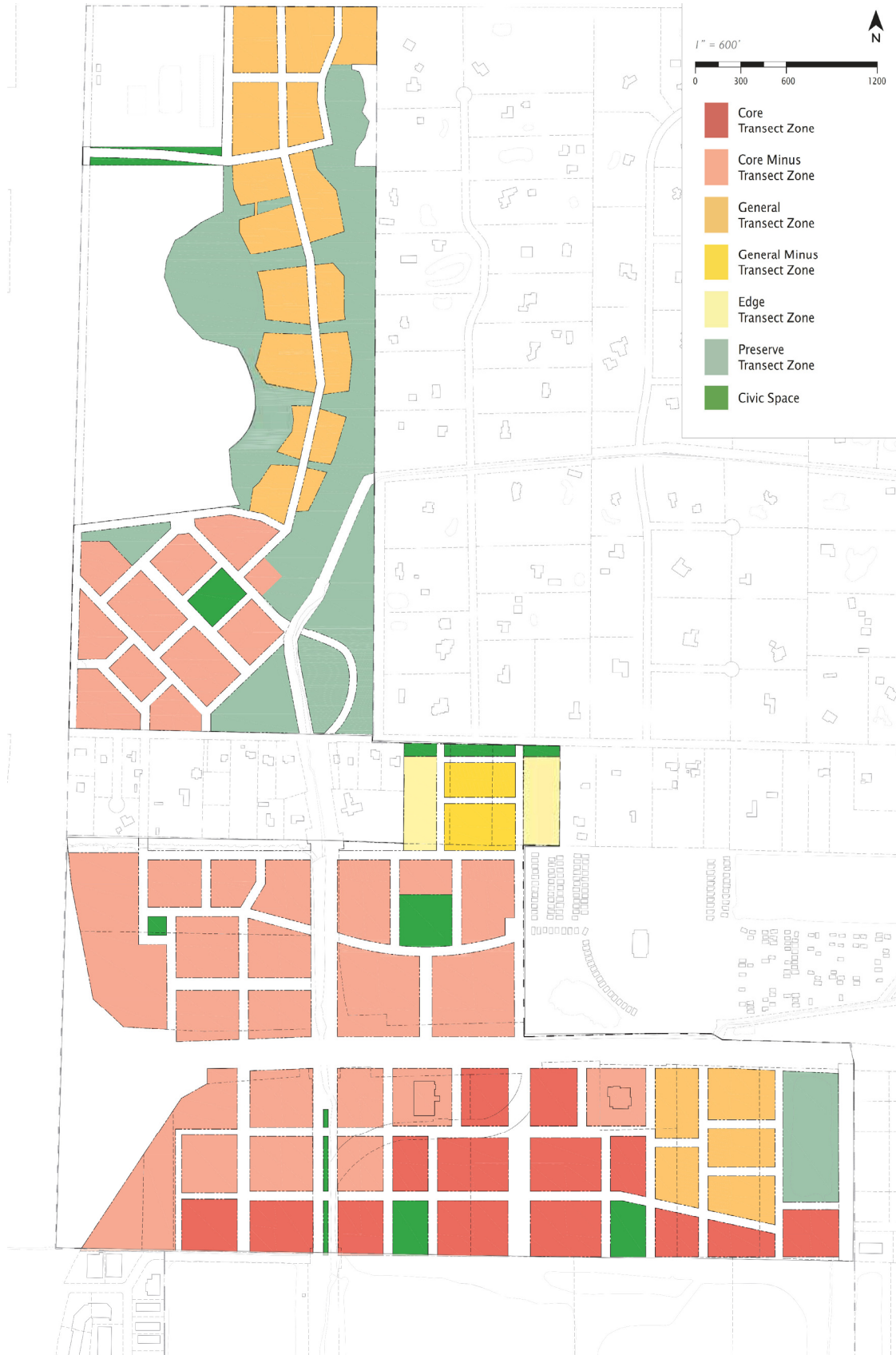
1. Much of the land has been formally designated as a future “major employment center.”
2. This land borders major thoroughfares; Fruitville Road is a major east-west arterial that connects downtown Sarasota to I-75.
3. Most other interchanges have been developed according to familiar patterns of “big box” retail and automobile-dominated arterials, but there is enough undeveloped land at this interchange that other patterns are still possible.

The vision for the planning area includes:

1. All tracts are to be connected to each other through a network of local and through streets.
2. Development parcels will be internally configured to adhere to the planning area vision of neighborhoods, districts and corridors.
3. The parcels will be developed on an integrated network of walkable streets and blocks using Sarasota County’s “Planned Mixed-Use Infill” (PMI) code.

An aerial photo of the planning area is shown below. The following pages show diagrams that will become part of a regulating plan. The first shows transect zones that ensure a diversity of intensities and land uses; the second shows thoroughfares; and the third highlights essential connections between the six tracts, which probably will be developed at different times.





Conceptual Transect Plan

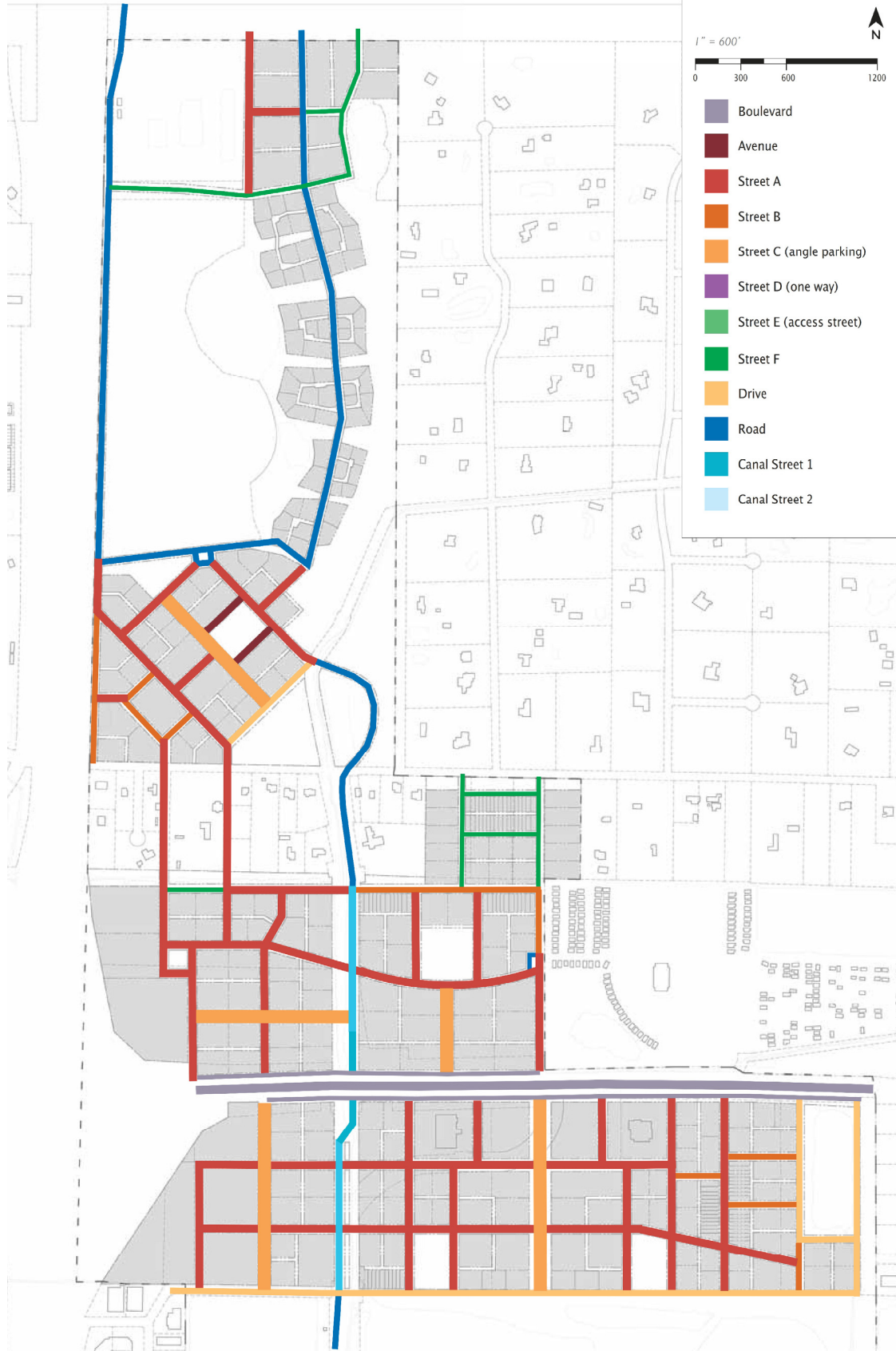
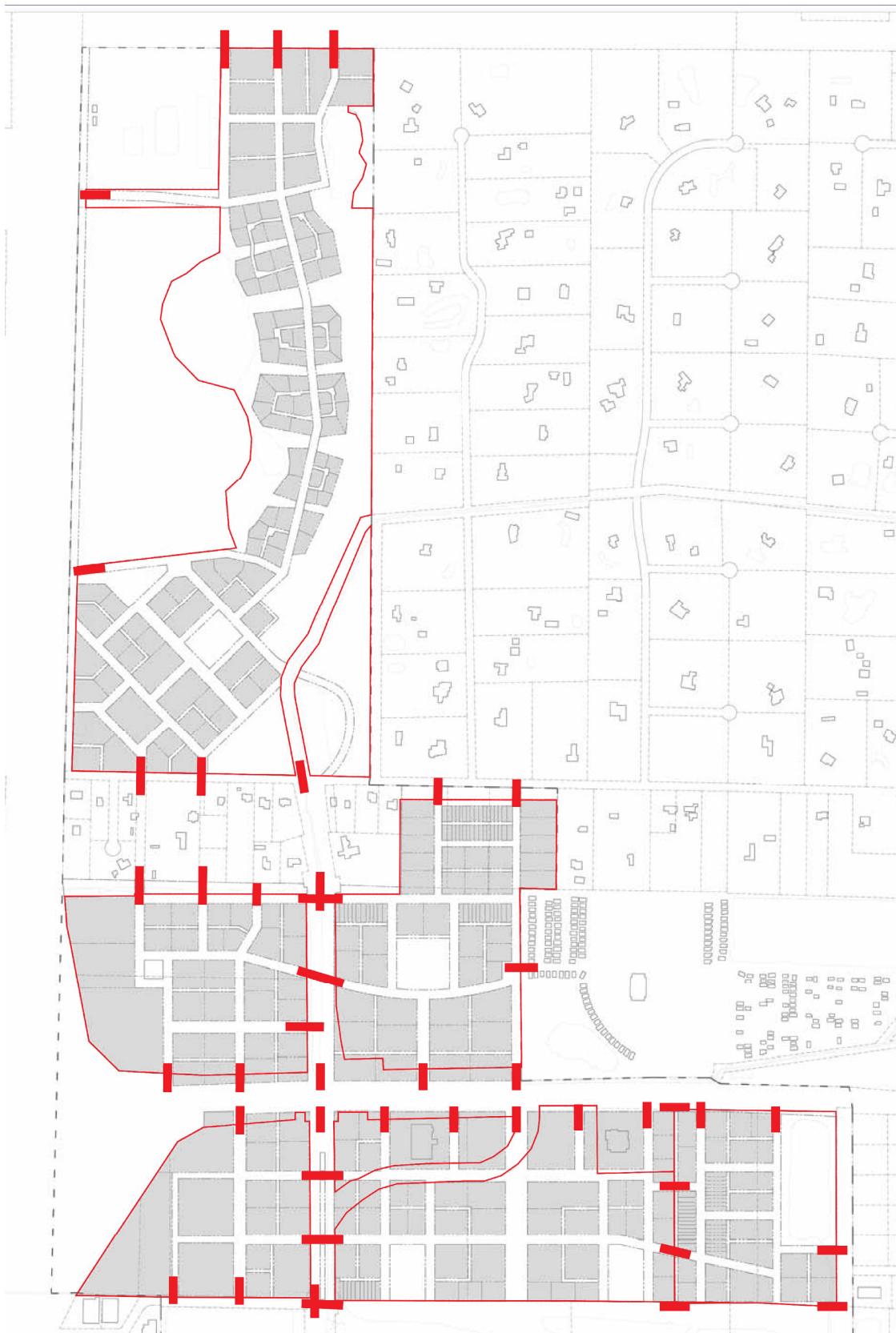


Figure 3.1 - Conceptual Thoroughfare Assignment Plan



Fruitville Initiative Conceptual Connectivity Plan