

## Planning for the Great American Small Town

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Located at the Falls of the Ohio River, Louisville dates its founding from the expedition of George Rogers Clark to explore the west in 1778. A river town active in trade and manufacturing, Louisville became the 16th largest city in the United States following the Civil War, when its industry fueled Southern Reconstruction. As home to the Kentucky Derby, Louisville appears in the national spotlight every year on the first Saturday in May luring hundreds of thousands of racing fans. In 2003, Louisville became the first community its size in 30 years to merge city and county governments creating a new consolidated local government. The new city of Louisville doubled its population to 700,000 and increased its geographic area six-fold to about 386 square miles.

Louisville, like most American cities, experienced rapid suburbanization following World War II, sprawling outward from its compact core. Throughout the last 50 years it has retained a fairly constant growth history, a slow, but consistent rate of about a half percent per year. This suburban growth pattern now extends into the surrounding nine counties. The majority of the land area within

Louisville, KY  
Population: 700,000

Louisville Metro remains zoned for single family residential development, conceived in 1943 to project a post-war model for development — 4.8 dwelling units to the acre. In the post-war developed portions of the community, this has resulted in a carpeting of the landscape with quarter acre lots and a linear pattern of commercial and residential development following the major radial highways. The Floyd's Fork area offers an opportunity to rethink this suburban paradigm and provide an alternative pattern for the future.

After the Ohio River, Floyd's Fork could be counted as Louisville's greatest remaining environmental asset. Part of the tributary network of creeks and small rivers feeding the Ohio, Floyd's Fork is a beautiful, meandering waterway winding through hills and farmland. The natural terrain is rolling countryside with some steep, forested slopes as well as a considerable amount of land in the flood plain. This area of some 47,000 acres of semi-rural countryside forms the core of the Floyd's Fork drainage basin and lies within 20 minutes of Louisville's metropolitan core. The area has seen sparse development in prior years due to the multiple



Photo courtesy of Louisville Metro Planning

complications of terrain, inadequate roadway systems and lack of sewers.

The first major initiative to focus on the Floyd's Fork corridor was the creation of the City of Parks plan, announced by Mayor Jerry Abramson in February, 2005. The City of Parks, Louisville's Greenprint for future recreational needs, called for the single largest acquisition and development of new parks to occur along what will be called the Floyd's Fork Greenway. A partnership with the non-profit 21st Century Parks, the project has raised over \$60 million to acquire, plan and develop over 4,000 acres of new parkland which will form three new parks connected by a 27-mile trail along Floyds Fork Creek. The trail will be part of the Louisville Loop, a 100 mile trail system that connects to the existing Olmsted Parks and Parkway system bringing suburban and urban areas together.

The second factor affecting growth patterns is the current effort to coordinate the provision of infrastructure. In 2006 a System Development Charge for roadways was instituted within benefit districts throughout the corridor. The Charge provides a fee per residential unit to fund safety improvements to the roadway system on a prioritized basis. Also, sewer service began to be extended into the region, following the work of other utilities which have tended to operate independently of one another. These events reinforced the need for a coordinated capital investment strategy to meet future needs. The planning of the Parks system and the availability of improved infrastructure is now providing the first development opportunities of significance within the Floyd's Fork corridor.

In order to be prepared for the impact of these changes, Planning and Design Services, the Metro planning agency, proposed a series of studies to balance the natural character

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Continued from Page 2

of the area with the inevitable pressures of development surrounding the new parks. Louisville had experienced residential demand surrounding parks once before, when the firm of Frederick Law Olmsted planned the original, historic parks system and many of the adjacent neighborhoods in the late 19th century. Those historic neighborhoods have retained their value over time, and the hope is to replicate that retention of value, but in a new and sustainable development pattern that capitalizes on the scenic beauty of the Floyd's Fork corridor. Further, it presents a unique opportunity to balance growth and infrastructure with the preservation of open space through an alternative approach to the creation of density.

The Comprehensive Plan for the Metro jurisdiction, adopted in 2000, has as one of its primary tenets a more focused growth pattern. The Plan encourages the creation of Centers — Town Centers, Village Centers and Regional Centers — where density could and should be encouraged ranging from multifamily apartments and condos to single family homes. These “small towns” would be located at the nexus of major transit and commuter routes and positioned to provide the essentials of daily living to residents. They could become centers of civic life with schools, police and fire service, and libraries, along with religious and cultural institutions. Ideally, in typical small town fashion, these new communities would have some focal point, a public space or architecturally significant structure, marking the center of town and hopefully providing a distinct character and unique sense of place.

The Centers idea finds a natural affinity within the Floyd's Fork corridor, where clustering of development in more compact forms will limit the impact on the land, and work better with the area's steep slopes and flood plains. For exactly the same reasons a more compact form of single family development was thought to be desirable as well. To these ends, Wallace, Roberts, and Todd has been engaged by Metro to assist in the planning of three to four new Town and Village Centers within the corridor. Depending on location and configuration, each of these towns or villages could be home to between 5,000 and 25,000 inhabitants over the next 50 years, so that density could be clustered at a walk-able scale in pedestrian-friendly communities. Recognizing that the outlying areas between the new villages could retain a more rural character, Randall Arendt, the leading practitioner of conservation design in the US, was engaged to craft a Con-

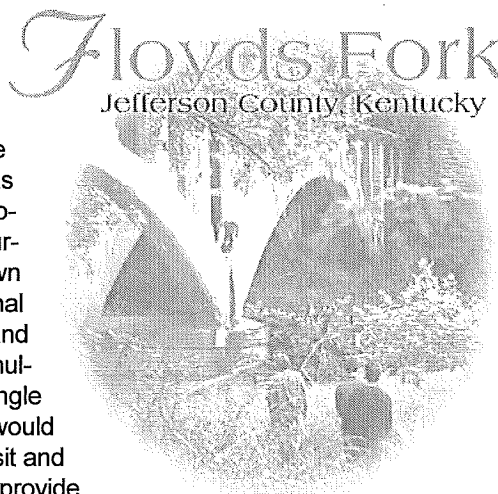
servation Subdivision regulation. The resulting, recently adopted regulation encourages the preservation of significant environmental features, and in exchange, allows the clustering of homes to minimize their impact on the land, reducing lot size and including the use of attached units such as townhomes and duplexes under certain circumstances. This method of subdivision also encourages developers to provide trails and wildlife corridors that can connect to the proposed Parks system, its 27-miles of trails and greenways, and an alternative means of transportation linkage to a Town or Village Center.

Lastly, a major transportation study currently underway hopes to encourage all infrastructure providers to develop a coordinated strategy for the phased provision of utility service and transportation connections. Involving the State DOT with local providers of highways and utilities, this will truly be the opportunity to efficiently plan and link both land use and transportation.

Overall, the density in the Floyd's Fork area may average the same as more typical suburban patterns, but the concentration of development in Centers and the use of Conservation Subdivisions in the surrounding countryside works with the land. Less infrastructure is required to produce the same or

greater yield of density or intensity, while the character, which defined the place and made it desirable in the first place, is preserved. The footprint of man's interventions in the area would be lessened as more sustainable, compact development makes increasing sense in an energy-short world.

Many of the current Floyd's Fork residents value their semi-rural way of life, living with the land. Neighborhood leaders in Floyd's Fork have generally responded favorably to this new paradigm, especially if increased density, focused in centers, becomes the development alternative that, in fact, preserves and enhances the area. It remains to be seen, as the planning work for the Parks system, the Centers Study and the Transportation and Infrastructure components draws to a close in the next year, if Louisville Metro can move forward this massive initiative. This once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to thoughtfully plan 47,000 acres will not come again. As our Mayor likes to joke in his speeches about merger “if you always do what you always did, you always get what you always got.” This is Louisville Metro's opportunity to truly plan and not “get what we always got.” Redefining density in a semi-rural setting that respects both the town and the countryside has the potential to create a great and valued place to live — a re-creation of The Great American Small Town.



Floyd's Fork  
Jefferson County, Kentucky