

II. Background

The City of Pequot Lakes was originally built around a railroad stop. The traditional way in which this was done throughout the Midwest was that the railroad company would install the rail line, plat out towns along the line, then sell the platted land to defray their construction costs. The railroad companies used the traditional grid pattern of development, a development style that had been used for human settlement across continents for thousands of years.

The grid approach served cities of this era well. The grid created a fairly dense, walkable development pattern that worked well for people getting off the train and the business owners trying to service them. As the city grew and matured, the grid provided the framework for mixed-use neighborhoods to expand around the commercial district. The entire area was surrounded by farms and hunting areas and was, in nearly every sense, self-sufficient.

Even so, the core of Pequot Lakes and its surrounding neighborhoods are constructed on the traditional grid. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of this pattern is critical to understanding how to revitalizing it.

Sense of Place

Besides the ease of surveying, the grid pattern provides a number of design advantages that were important in an era prior to automobile-base design. The public realm (the space between buildings now devoted largely to automobiles) provided space for social interaction. The orientation of the homes towards the public realm increased security. Mobility for pedestrians was enhanced by the connectivity of the grid. Most importantly, the grid provided a platform that could grow over time as the community matured.

The social space of the public realm was created by a design that emphasized the value of that space. The layout and spacing of the buildings created what has been called a “sense-of-place”. This is a design technique that also goes back to ancient times.

Sense-of-place is easy to understand and identify. A room has a sense-of-place. When you are in a room, it is clear that you are in a place. The feature that gives the room this feeling is the walls. Without walls, the room would not exist and there would be no “place”.

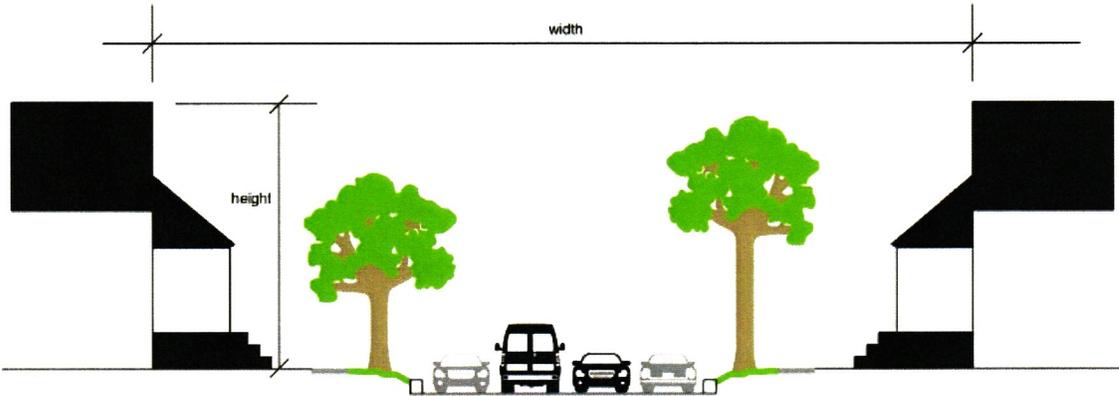
So it is with the public realm. When the buildings on either side of the public space line up and form walls, the public space feels like a room and there is a sense-of-place. The primary design element is to make sure that buildings are properly spaced. If the public space is too narrow because the buildings are too close, the space will feel cramped and the sense-of-place will be lost. If the public space is too vast because the buildings that bound it are too far apart, the effect of the walls will be gone and there will be no sense-of-place.

There is a standard design ratio to obtaining sense-of-place. That ratio of the width of the public realm to the height of the buildings must fall between 3:1 and 6:1. This is how that looks in a predominantly residential neighborhood.

Public Realm

Residential Section

The ratio of $\frac{\text{width}}{\text{height}}$ should not be less than ③ nor greater than ⑥ to maintain a strong sense of place within the public realm.

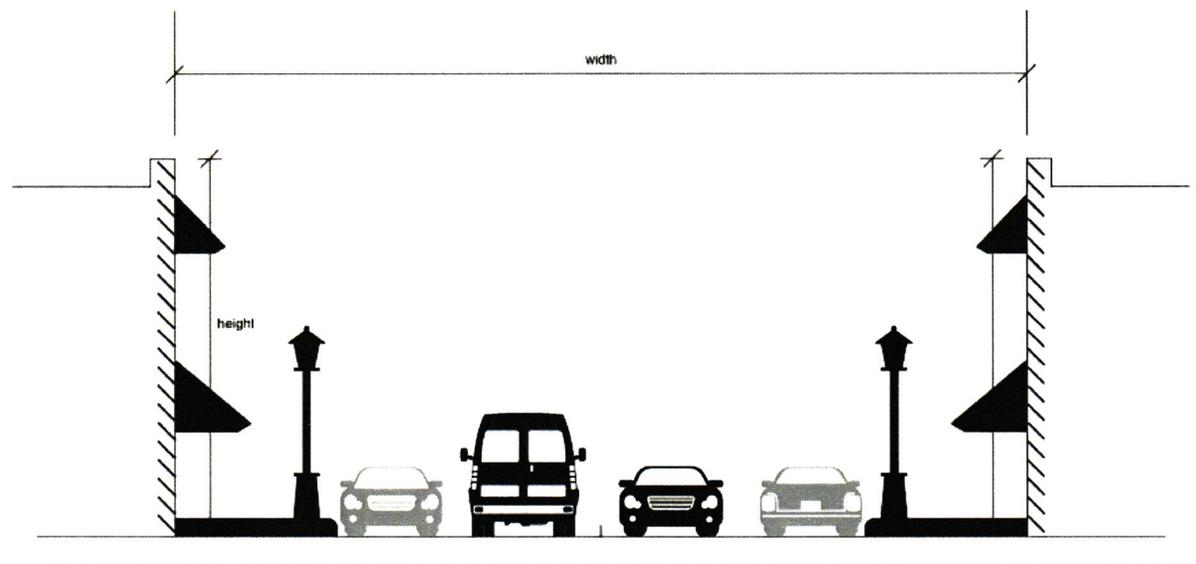


This is how the ratio is applied in a predominantly commercial neighborhood.

Public Realm

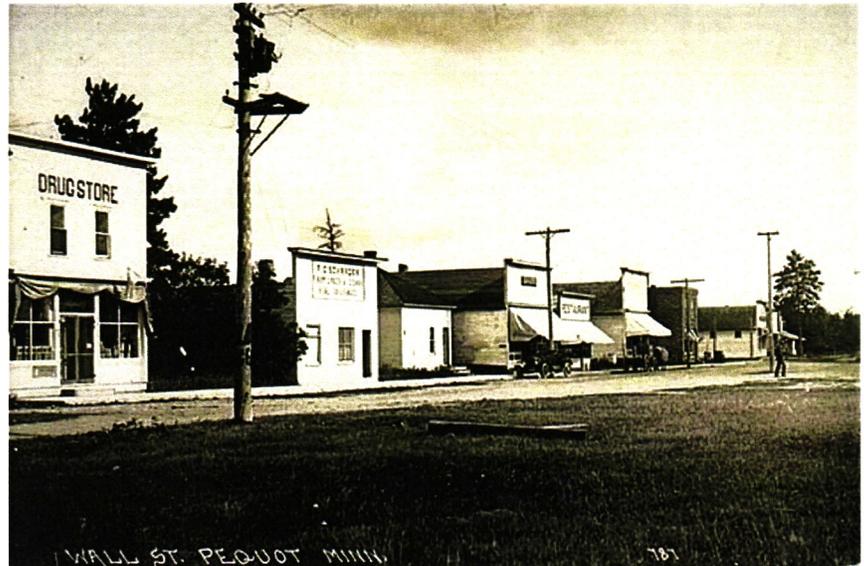
Commercial Section

The ratio of $\frac{\text{width}}{\text{height}}$ should not be less than ③ nor greater than ⑥ to maintain a strong sense of place within the public realm.



In the historical parts of Pequot Lakes, the public realm was scaled and the buildings placed with the intention of creating this sense-of-place. This would not have been a special design criteria – it was simply the standard approach for the period.

Pequot Lakes was still a very small town as the transition was made to a design based on accommodating the automobile. This cut short the maturing process of Pequot's original development pattern. If we are to reactivate these areas, it is important to understand how a historical neighborhood grows and evolves over time.



Evolution of an Historical Neighborhood

The underlying economics of the development pattern of most small towns today differs greatly from the assumptions of the traditional development pattern they were founded upon. As opposed to horizontal growth – which is very expensive to maintain – the underlying economics of the traditional small town was based on the concepts of infill and vertical growth. This was how capital investments were paid for and major infrastructure was maintained over time.

A neighborhood established on a traditional grid would initially have modest private-sector investments. Originally these would not even be served by public utilities.

Over time, new development would fill in between these modest investments. With each new building, the public realm would become more complete and, based on the established pattern, more valuable.

In successful neighborhoods – those that attracted more private-sector investment demand than could be sustained with infill – there would begin to be redevelopment pressure. Over time, structures would be torn down and replaced with structures of higher value.

The neighborhood would continue to mature on the same grid framework. While a small town context would preclude the construction of skyscrapers and other very intense development, mature small-town neighborhoods have a mix of uses (residential and commercial) that together create places of high value. These neighborhoods would surround a central core whose value was based on its proximity and access to the surrounding neighborhoods.

In Pequot Lakes, as in most small towns in the United States that were founded in the railroad era, the natural evolution of places on the traditional development pattern has been disrupted by the great American experiment of suburbanization. Financially, this has left both the traditional neighborhoods

and the new areas of suburban development financially fragile, in need of ever-increasing amounts of new growth to maintain long-term infrastructure commitments.

~~That model is financially unsustainable. To reach a stable economic situation, Pequot Lakes needs to reactivate the natural evolutionary processes that will allow these neighborhoods to grow and mature over time on their historic framework.~~

Pequot Lakes should strive to reactivate the natural evolutionary process that will allow these neighborhoods to grow and mature over time on its historic framework. Pequot Lake's goal is to achieve a stable and/or growing economy.

III. Downtown Keys to Success

The City has identified the following guiding principles for the future of downtown Pequot Lakes. These principles were developed with the input of residents, business owners and other downtown stakeholders to protect the character of Pequot while promoting growth in downtown.

Key #1: Maintain the character of the downtown while also preserving the individuality and variety of the buildings located there. Continue quality while resisting uniformity.

Key #1: Maintain the character of the downtown while evolving over time as human needs, available technologies, and aesthetic styles play out.

Downtown Pequot Lakes was not created with a grand centralizing theme. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, the buildings in the downtown have a charm and seem to belong in their surroundings. There is a desire to maintain the high quality of the investments made in the downtown, but there is also strong resistance to any type of uniform standard (whether imposed or voluntarily adopted) that would unnaturally alter the character of downtown.

Key #2: Continually strengthen the "destination" of downtown, ensuring that it is a place that will naturally draw people year round.

Studies of the Pequot Lakes downtown have demonstrated that retail shoppers tend to park and then visit all of the available businesses. This "destination effect" – with Pequot Lakes as a destination as opposed to one specific store - is made possible by the number of quality businesses that are located in Downtown. Each time a new quality business is added, the overall draw of the downtown expands, so accelerating the growth of new businesses will create success for all Downtown businesses.

The “destination effect” is further enhanced by how public spaces are designed. Walkways and thoroughfares that are inviting to pedestrians, along with shops that are pedestrian-oriented and scaled, create an atmosphere that is conducive to destination shopping. Public spaces provide extra value when they encourage shoppers to wander from business to business, or to experience the downtown in an enjoyable way that makes them want to return another day.

Key #3: Look to compete regionally where the downtown can offer a specialized and unique experience. Look to compete locally where the downtown can offer a convenient and satisfying experience.

There is sometimes a desire to try and provide everything to everyone and, in a sense, compete with a regional center like Baxter for customers. Giving in to this desire is a losing strategy, while keeping focused on what Pequot Lakes does best is a key to long-term success.

Businesses in Pequot Lakes are most competitive when offering either a unique experience or a custom and high-quality service. These are the things that bring people to town over and over again and capture both a tourist and a local market. The Downtown will struggle over the long run to sustain offerings that directly compete with those offered in the Brainerd/Baxter Regional Center. ~~The large retailers such as Wal-Mart, Target, Best Buy, Cub Foods, Super 1, Home Depot and Menards have agglomerated in Baxter along the TH 371 corridor. These places~~ The Brainerd/Baxter retailers are highly accessible to the residents of Pequot Lakes. That fact will stifle the size and scale of non-specialized offerings the Pequot Lakes neighborhood can support.

The downtown, when fully developed, will be a significant regional attraction if the experience is different, and more pleasant, than the experience of shopping in other downtowns. The small, locally-owned shops currently provide a unique mix of products and services. This uniqueness should be capitalized on to capture a larger share of the regional market.

Pequot Lakes ~~will not be able~~ may struggle to compete regionally for some offerings. In these instances, the convenience of Downtown, combined with the personalized service, can help retain local shoppers that may be enticed to go other places.

The Downtown must maintain a mix of unique offerings that appeal to a regional market as well as convenience and quality service offerings that will retain local customers.

Key #4: Reduce the seasonality of the downtown by increasing the number of residents living within the city’s traditional neighborhoods with convenient access to downtown for bikeability and walkability.

Comment for Key #4: We should continue to promote the Downtown Mixed Use zone that allows for higher redevelopment of this area, especially by allowing apartments above businesses. This also keeps our ratio mentioned earlier in this section. The ratio is important because studies show it creates higher property values and sense of place.

In a tourism-based economy, the strong summer months can sometimes be augmented with Holiday shopping and an occasional winter festival. Frequently this isn't enough to support a business. Promoting some offerings that would cater to local needs, while at the same time creating opportunities for more housing units within walking distance of Downtown along with better connections, creates a supply/demand relationship that will generate more opportunity for growth in the downtown.

Key #5: Understand that the highest return of investment for the City over the long-term is to improve the use of existing infrastructure, not the expansion of horizontal growth on the periphery of town.

Comment for Key #5: This is still true, and a must in my opinion. We must not be tempted to extend infrastructure where it doesn't already exist. We need to maximize what we already have. Not one cost benefit analysis we've done in the past shows further extension of services as a viable option. Flatly put, the City cannot afford to maintain the new project (roads, sewer, and water) without massive density. Our return and future success depends on our ability to induce growth where services already exist.

Key #6: Provide a wide array of housing types, with some areas of moderate or high density, at both market rate and affordable levels.

Key #7: Successful parks usually have five elements associated with them. They are engaging, adaptable, authentic, connected, and iconic. They should be designed to provide comfort, convenience and enjoyment, fostering social interactions and physical connectivity.

Comment: Keep the ratio, keep the DMU Zone; don't induce development where services don't exist (even if the developer pays to put them in!) Lastly, here's how you induce further development in neighborhoods: When you do repave a street section, put in the right amenities like sidewalk, boulevard, and street lights. This will cost just slightly more in the overall project total, but the amenities will induce homes and buildings to get redeveloped. This in turn creates a higher tax base, and nicer neighborhoods!

Comment: Downtown revitalization is much more than making physical improvements; it's about bringing people together.