

Downtown Neighborhood District Plan (DNDP) Study

Progress Report

August 2009 to February 2010



Overview

In July 2009, Town Council directed Town staff to proceed with the district plan for Main Street, and the following steps have taken place since that time:

1. Framework review and approval by Planning Commission and Town Council.
2. Analysis of existing conditions, opportunities, and constraints.
3. Focus Group meetings and Public Workshops to review existing conditions, opportunities and constraints, and discuss desired land uses, mobility, facilities, and development characteristics for the study area.
4. Development of preliminary alternative concepts.
5. Focus Group review of preliminary alternative concepts.
6. Staff meetings with agency partners (on-going).
7. Development of two alternatives.

The information and materials prepared during these steps are available on the Town's website at www.ci.mammoth-lakes.ca.us/comdev/districtplanning.htm#dp and will be displayed at the upcoming open houses and public meetings on February 19, 22, and 23rd. After these public meetings, staff will proceed with a broad technical analysis of the alternatives to develop a preferred alternative. Ultimately, all of this information will be compiled in the Downtown Neighborhood District Plan (DNDP) study that will be presented to the Focus Group, Planning Commission, and Town Council for acceptance.

Background

The General Plan requires district planning for areas of the community that have special needs or conditions and would benefit from a community process looking at solutions to aid in future planning (Policy L.1.D). The goal of district planning is to determine the specific form, function, and character of an area regardless of any pending applications for development.

Mammoth Mountain Ski Area (MMSA) and the Snowcreek Investment Company took the initiative to kick-off the Downtown district planning process by having Hart Howerton, an experienced planning firm, prepare a concept. The DNDP study is unique for various reasons. First, Town staff is serving as the "planning consultant" to MMSA, who initiated this district plan; there is no third party consultant. Second, this district plan is not being initiated in response to a specific development proposal but instead to address the complex, district-wide planning issues facing this area and to establish better guidance for future development. Finally, a planning concept for the Downtown area was prepared by Hart Howerton at the request of MMSA and Snowcreek Investment Company to begin to look at potential district options, which has served as a catalyst to the alternatives developed for this DNDP.

With the adoption of the Fiscal Year 2009-2010 budget and work plan, the Town Council directed to staff to proceed with the DNDP in cooperation with MMSA. The Town Council identified completion of the DNDP as a priority, alongside completion of town-wide district planning. Town staff has focused on the DNDP as "Phase I" of town-wide district planning, completion of the South Old Mammoth Road, Sierra Valley Sites and Gateway NDPs as "Phase II", and finally, closeout of draft NDPs (Sierra Star and East OSSC) as "Phase III".

Process and Public Participation

One of the important purposes of district planning is to ensure that the general public and key stakeholders of a district are involved throughout the process. The DNDP process has and will continue to include Focus Group meetings, community workshops, and public Planning Commission and Town Council meetings. Two week advanced notification of each community workshop is done to ensure a broad and inclusive public process. The public has and will also be able to comment via internet surveys created by MMSA throughout the process. In addition, Town staff has coordinated agency meetings to facilitate input from agency partners including Caltrans, USFS, Mono County, MCWD, MLFPD, MLTPA, ESTA, and MUSD.

Jurisdictional Context

The jurisdictional context of a district plan establishes stakeholder and agency relationships, interests, and constraints, which can shape policy and actions. The DNDP study area includes a range of multi-jurisdictional components:

- Caltrans, who is responsible for the design, construction, maintenance, and operation of the California State Highway System, is owner of the majority of the right-of-way for Main Street/State Route 203; therefore, Caltrans is a significant participant in the overall street design discussions and analysis.
- The USFS, who manages public lands, owns a substantial amount of property at the east end of Main Street, which is generally outside of the Town's Urban Growth Boundary (UGB). The General Plan limits development outside of the UGB.
- Mono County and the Town own the majority of the Civic Center site, at the southeast corner of Sierra Park Road and Main Street/State Route 203. Mammoth Hospital, located south of the Civic Center site, has an option for a portion of this property.
- The Mammoth Unified School District provides the public school system in Mammoth Lakes, and owns property north of the schools that abuts the DNDP study area.
- Utility and service providers, such as MLFPD, MCWD, ESTA and MMSA, have a considerable interest because recommendations of the DNDP may have implications for the services they provide.

Framework

The Framework provides the overall guidance and scope of work for district plans, and describes the areas to be studied, guiding principles (from the General Plan), the major issues and subjects/topics to be considered. The Planning Commission and Town Council considered and approved the DNDP Framework during public meetings in Fall 2009. The approved Framework is available at www.ci.mammoth-lakes.ca.us/comdev/districtplanning.htm#dp.

- Study Area: The DNDP study area includes all of the General Plan designated Main Street and Shady Rest districts, and overlaps the Old Mammoth Road and the northwest portion of the Gateway district. The study area boundary extends from the North Village along both sides of Main Street to include those properties zoned Commercial Lodging (CL) and Commercial General (CG) as well as Fire Station #1, the Welcome Center (USFS land), Mammoth RV Park and the Town/County Civic Center site. The Welcome Center and USFS lands north of Main Street are outside of the Urban Growth Boundary. The study area is approximate 210 acres. To organize and facilitate the analysis of this large study area, five subareas were identified, based on their location and characteristics.

- **Sphere of Influence:** The sphere of influence for the DNDP encompasses a more extensive area to consider in relationship to Main Street. The sphere of influence includes an area bounded by Meridian Boulevard to the south and Forest Trail to the north that is being considered in the DNDP study in terms of surrounding uses, relationships, and impacts.
- **Guiding Principles:** The DNDP Guiding Principles include the applicable Neighborhood and District Character description from the General Plan and define the key characteristics and concepts that should guide planning for the study area. A compiled, comprehensive list of Guiding Principles, as well as a summary list of key principles for the DNDP study area is included in the approved Framework.
- **Preliminary Issues Identification:** The DNDP Framework issues summary is a broadly focused list of preliminary issues with the expectation that more detailed issues, opportunities and constraints, analysis, and recommendations would be generated during the NDP process.

Existing Conditions and Context

Town staff completed a review of the physical context and existing conditions in the DNDP study area. The findings of the review, which included an overview of the zoning regulations, existing land uses and conditions, the General Plan transect, and a survey of tree heights were presented to the Focus Group and public at community workshops. Some of the existing conditions that were highlighted as issues are listed below in no particular order:

- There is no attractive “town entry” experience (no “there there”).
- Existing “hodge-podge” of buildings and uses are not connected, coherent, or appealing.
- Main Street needs better gathering places, such as plazas, event venues, and parks to create more lively and attractive destinations.
- Main Street is not feet-first and is unsafe for pedestrians (cars drive at high speeds, the street is a significant barrier - 9 lanes, and there are gaps in the existing pedestrian infrastructure).
- Large right-of-way and setback requirements place buildings far away from the street, which reduces visibility of storefronts. In addition, snow storage blocks views of storefronts in winter.
- Existing surface parking is inefficient, unattractive, and is not the best use of land.
- There is too much traffic during peak periods (i.e. 4pm on a winter Saturday).
- Cut-through traffic is a problem for adjacent residential neighborhoods.
- Small and fragmented ownerships along Main Street.
- Concern regarding “down-zonings” and whether existing uses would continue to be allowed.

Opportunities and Constraints

The existing conditions survey and input from the Focus Group and public were used to develop a summary of opportunities and constraints (see www.ci.mammoth-lakes.ca.us/comdev/districtplanning.htm#dp). Some of the opportunities and constraints are summarized below.

- Opportunities:
 - Achieve a more stable year round economy and employment.
 - Serve as a catalyst for revitalization.

- Create walkable mixed-use districts that support businesses while preserving community character (“village in the trees”).
- Create a memorable welcome statement at the town entry.
- Create a vibrant street character similar to other successful small alpine towns.
- Complete and expand the feet-first system to safely connect recreation access points, trails, residential areas, and businesses.
- Develop event and recreation facilities.
- Include parking facilities to ensure adequate and convenient parking that supports land uses and transit.
- Improve emergency response times.
- Provide workforce and market-rate housing opportunities.
- Improve snow management methods; design to maximize solar access.
- Constraints:
 - Existing visitor attractions are strongly seasonal; remote location.
 - Financial resources and funding.
 - Uncertain economic climate; no redevelopment agency.
 - Varied ownerships and interests.
 - Caltrans ownership of Main Street.
 - Limited available sites for desirable amenities and facilities.
 - Existing development and circulation pattern.
 - Outdated development regulations (Zoning Code).
 - Topography.
 - Snow/winter conditions.
 - Concern with impacts on surrounding residential uses.

Focus Group Critique of Hart Howerton Concept

At the Focus Group’s kick-off meeting, the group critiqued the Hart Howerton Concept. The Focus Group identified key likes, key dislikes, and other comments and concerns related to the Hart Howerton Concept. Some of the desirable elements of the Hart Howerton Concept were incorporated into the DNDP alternatives.

Preliminary Alternative Concepts

Based on the Hart Howerton Concept, Framework, existing conditions, opportunities and constraints, and input from the Focus Group, public, and agency partners, staff developed four alternative concepts. Each of these concepts reflected the following common ideas:

- Long term vision,
- Community input,
- Compelling and charismatic ideas,
- Broad community benefit,
- Avoiding down-zonings,

- Allowing existing uses,
- Focusing on opportunity sites, and
- Practicality and financial feasibility.

The preliminary alternative concepts were presented as a series of diagrams:

- Pattern,
- Transect,
- Mobility,
- Economic/Social Capacity, and
- Recreation/Leisure Capacity.

Certain ideas and components were consistent across all four concepts including placemaking¹, complete streets (i.e. streets accommodate pedestrians, bikes, transit, and cars), emergency access, snow management, successful economy, and signage and way finding. The preliminary alternative concepts reflect a range of potential change from a small amount of change to a substantial amount of change.

- Polished Plan Concept: Focused, incremental changes to improve aesthetics and functionality based on existing land uses and limited facilities. Least amount of physical change; focus on improving and upgrading existing properties.
- Linked Anchors/Median and Roundabouts: Small median and multiple roundabouts along Main Street connecting the North Village hub and Town Center hub (North Old Mammoth Road). Principally a traffic smoothing plan; not significant improvements in Main Street character, form or function. Strongly defined town entry with roundabout, event/sports park, and civic center.
- Linked Anchors/Greenway: Large central greenway along Main Street connecting the North Village hub and Town Center hub. Greenway includes a multi-use path, provides a pedestrian refuge and safer street crossings. Moderate changes to land use and development standards in certain areas along Main Street. Strongly defined town entry with roundabout, event/sports park, and civic center.
- Walkable Nodes: Land use intensity in concentrated pedestrian-oriented nodes along Main Street. Each node is unique and focused around a central square. Traffic calming via squares and increased pedestrian safety via narrowed Main Street. Substantial pattern and visual changes along Main Street; limited structural changes at west end. Internal trip capture, new roads, shared parking facilities, and transit expansion decreases cars and traffic. Strongly defined town entry with roundabout, event/sports park, and civic center.

Three concepts of extending gondola lines/systems through town were also developed with input from MMSA. The Linked Anchors/Greenway and Walkable Nodes concepts could both accommodate a gondola extension, or some other mode of rapid transit such as a tram or rapid bus line.

¹ Placemaking is the creation of places that attract people because they are well designed, pleasurable, and have an interesting and animated mix of uses.

Alternatives

On December 15, 2009, the Focus Group reviewed the four preliminary alternative concepts including discussions of street pattern, street sections, parking, pedestrian and bike network, trails and recreation, event venues, and land use (see www.ci.mammoth-lakes.ca.us/comdev/districtplanning.htm#dp). The Focus Group's general consensus was preference for the Linked Anchors/Greenway and Walkable Nodes concepts because these appeared to be most consistent with achieving the DNDP Guiding Principles and goals, by incorporating significant improvements that can result in positive and high impact change. The other two concepts, Polished Plan and Linked Anchors/Median and Roundabouts, were not preferred because they would be unlikely to achieve the goals and Guiding Principles of the DNDP. However, some variation of a Polished Plan was considered to be a way to represent early and progressive phases of change, and to be applied to areas of Main Street where more extensive change was felt to be unnecessary. Any alternative will require phasing and incremental improvements. Phasing of the alternatives will be reviewed during the technical analysis. The two alternatives are:

Greenway: Main Street is an attractive, functional, and efficient corridor, including a central greenway extending from Old Mammoth Road to Manzanita Road, linking well defined anchors at the North Village and Town Center.

- Event/sports park at town entry.
- Civic Center complex and USFS housing on USFS land.
- New road to serve Civic Center complex.
- Greenway moves street to front of buildings while maintaining efficient traffic flow.
- Mixed use Town Center extended from Old Mammoth Road to south side of Main Street to Manzanita Road.
- On street parking and strategically located parking structures.
- Shady Rest Tract includes housing and park/open space.
- Feet-first mobility via complete streets, completing gaps in existing system, safer pedestrian crossings, expansion of transit system with a gondola, tram, rapid bus line, or other mode of transit.
- Based on Focus Group and other input, the greenway was tapered at the west end (to Manzanita Road) because the topography farther west made the central greenway impractical in that area.
- Current mixed lodging/residential uses continue along west Main Street.

Downtown: Main Street is defined by a series of strong, well integrated and walkable nodes that unify and connect its north and south sides. This alternative provides a traditional "main street" character with street-fronting buildings, supported by a greater mode split and improved traffic management to a more connected street grid.

- Three nodes: Town Center with civic center node, Mixed Retail/Residential node, and High Intensity Lodging node.
- Event/sports park at town entry.
- Mixed use Civic Center complex on USFS land.
- Multiple new roads to serve Civic Center complex, events/sports park, schools, and industrial park increases route options.

- Main Street narrowed, squares added, and buildings moved to street to achieve a traditional “main street” character.
- Mixed use Town Center extended from Old Mammoth Road along north and south Main Street to Post Office area.
- On street parking and strategically located parking structures at each node.
- Shady Rest Tract includes housing and park/open space.
- Feet-first mobility via complete streets, completing gaps in existing system, safer pedestrian crossings, traffic calming via squares, expansion of transit system with a gondola, tram, rapid bus line, or other mode of transit.
- Based on Focus Group and other input, the squares were modified to reduce sharp corners to facilitate traffic movement.
- Current mixed lodging/residential uses continue along west Main Street.

The Focus Group reviewed these two alternatives and supported different elements of each alternative were supported. Some felt that a hybrid of the Greenway and Downtown alternatives was desirable.

Next Steps/Look Ahead

The two alternatives, Greenway and Downtown, will be reviewed and discussed at the February public open houses and workshop. Staff is looking forward to receiving input that will be incorporated into the alternatives. After these public meetings, staff will proceed with an analysis of each alternative to develop and determine a preferred alternative. The analysis will include population at one time (PAOT), population impact evaluation criteria (PIEC), traffic, and phasing and implementation.

Once the analysis is complete, staff will present the preferred alternative and accompanying recommendations to the Focus Group and Planning Commission and Town Council at public meetings for review and acceptance. The DNDP recommendations may include detailed regulations, conditions, and programs that would be supplemental to the General Plan. The DNDP recommendations will consider draft plans such as the Draft Trails System Master Plan, Draft Parks and Recreation Master Plan, and Draft Mobility Plan. After the DNDP recommendations are accepted by Town Council, staff anticipates codification as directed by Town Council.