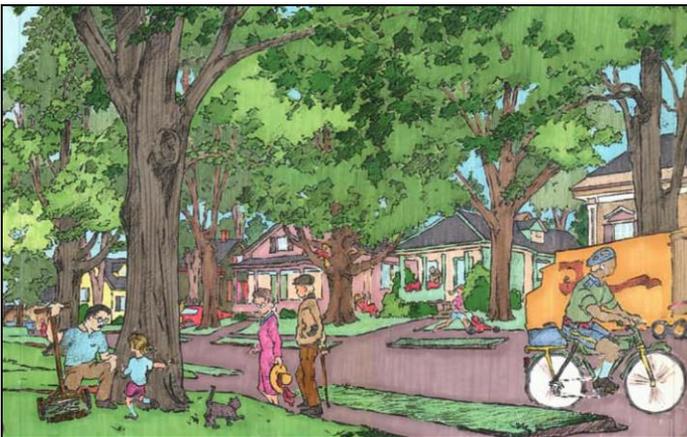


### The Great American Neighborhood

The traditional neighborhood - a place where people of all ages can live, meet their daily needs, and spend their leisure time, all within walking distance; a place where kids can walk or bike to school and play with friends in the neighborhood; a place where people are brought together in their day-to-day lives, creating a sense of shared community. Maybe you remember a neighborhood like this. Or maybe you live in one like it today. But in many places this kind of neighborhood is hard to find. In an age of low density suburbs, with local zoning ordinances that often prohibit this kind of neighborhood from being built, a "Great American Neighborhood" (GAN) is the exception, and is most often associated with times past.

Yet surveys by the Maine State Planning Office indicate many Maine homebuyers are looking for features often associated with older "traditional" neighborhoods. These include:

- ❖ Walkability
- ❖ Proximity to services and amenities
- ❖ Places to gather for community and socializing
- ❖ Diversity
- ❖ Settings with trees, parks, and access to nature
- ❖ A sense of privacy and quiet
- ❖ Limited traffic



From *The Great American Neighborhood – A Guide to Livable Design* (Bruce Towl, artist)

As a growing number of people seek to live in places where they can find a combination of features mentioned above, the "Great American Neighborhood" (also called 'Traditional Neighborhood Design') is making a comeback. This type of neighborhood also promotes a development pattern that helps preserve natural resources and rural character, while strengthening community vitality. If your

community is looking for alternative ways to accommodate growth, a Great American Neighborhood may offer another approach.

### What Makes a Great American Neighborhood?

A Great American Neighborhood can take many forms. Just as every community is different, every Great American Neighborhood is different. But they all share some combination of the features mentioned above. Let's look more closely at these features.

#### **Walkability**

The ability to walk or bicycle to where you need or want to go is at the heart of a Great American Neighborhood. So sidewalks and bike paths/lanes are key design features. Both of these amenities help ensure that walking and bicycling are convenient and safe alternatives to the car.

Compact development and an interconnected street network are also important to walkability. The desirable size of a walkable neighborhood is an area that can be walked in about 10 minutes.

#### **A Mix of Uses, Services and Amenities**

A Great American Neighborhood provides a mix of uses (i.e. housing, retail, civic, recreation) in close proximity. The goal is to provide for daily needs within walking or bicycling distance. A compact pattern of development, with a mix of uses, services and amenities, allows people to stay in the neighborhood to meet their needs.

#### **Community Gathering Places and Identity**

A Great American Neighborhood promotes community. It encourages people to interact, gather and socialize with one another. By providing features such as a town square, a green, centralized civic buildings (e.g. library, school, town hall, community center, etc.), and neighborhood parks, people are encouraged to come together.

These features also create a distinct core to help give the neighborhood an identity. The ability to identify one neighborhood as distinct from another, with unique features and boundaries, is part of the Great American Neighborhood concept.

#### **Diversity**

Social, economic, cultural and architectural diversity provide opportunities for variety in the day-to-day lives of people. A Great American Neighborhood encourages diversity through different types of housing, businesses, uses, landscape and building design.

### Connection to Nature

Trees, parks, and access to nature add to neighborhood livability and the quality of neighborhood life. These spaces also have a proven track record of enhancing property values, regardless of their size. Tree lined streets and walkways, small-scale parks within the neighborhood boundary, and larger adjacent open spaces such as fields or woodlands provide a connection with nature.

### Public and Private Spaces

People need both the public realm and privacy in their day-to-day lives. This is one of the most important elements of neighborhood design. It is related to human-powered mobility, personal interactions, and freedom from high traffic volumes, etc. It is something that is needed on every residential lot.

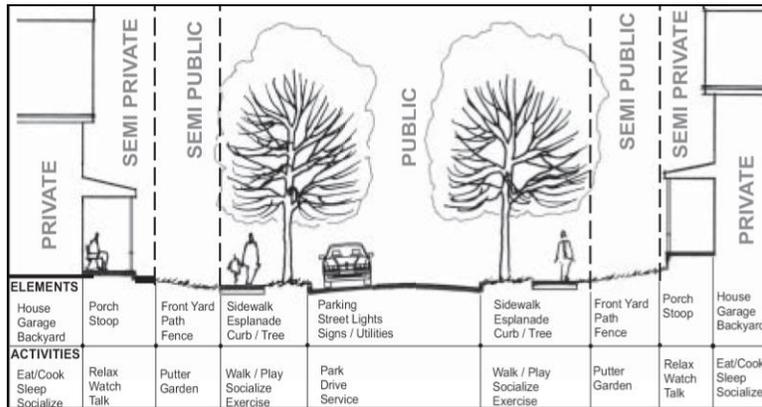
The public-private continuum (as it is sometimes called) allows for formal and informal interaction with neighbors and people passing by, while also meeting the need for privacy. The continuum (illustrated below) includes the following spaces:

**Public:** the public 40-50 foot right-of-way, including the street, curbs, and sidewalks with trees

**Semi-public:** one's front yard

**Semi-private:** one's porch or stoop

**Private:** one's house and back yard



From *The Great American Neighborhood – A Guide to Livable Design*

### Protection from Excessive Traffic

Street design is an important feature of a Great American Neighborhood. Streets give the neighborhood its shape. Streets also carry traffic that presents both safety and noise issues for neighborhood residents.

**Traffic safety:** Neighborhood traffic is part of daily life. The problem comes when the number of cars is so great that crossing the street becomes difficult and safety becomes a concern. The general goal for a neighborhood street is no more than 2000 vehicles per day. Neighborhood cohesion begins to break down at 5000 cars/day. (see "Livable Streets Retested," Bosselman et al., APA Journal, Spring 1999.)

**Traffic noise:** Traffic volume and traffic speed both contribute to traffic noise. Keeping traffic volumes below the 2000 mark mentioned above, and keeping speed limits at or less than 25 mph, will help reduce traffic noise. The target noise level (measured in decibels (dB)) outside homes should be 55 dB. At 65 dB traffic noise becomes an interference—people say they can't converse, watch TV, etc. at this level. (For comparison, some common noise levels are: normal conversation, 60 dB; a ringing telephone, 80 dB; a tractor, 90 dB; a snowblower, 105 dB; and an ambulance siren, 120 dB)

To address both safety and noise concerns, neighborhood street design should direct commuter or through traffic around, not through, the neighborhood. And the streets within a neighborhood should be designed to discourage high speed, high volume cut-through traffic. To further help reduce traffic, streets should also be designed to accommodate pedestrians and bicyclists to promote alternatives to driving a car.

### Conclusion

If you are thinking about your community's future growth, consider whether a Great American Neighborhood might help achieve some of your goals. Are there opportunities to expand or improve existing neighborhoods with some of the concepts mentioned above? Are there opportunities to create a new Great American Neighborhood? The Great American Neighborhood offers features that many people are looking for when deciding where to live. The Great American Neighborhood could be one of Maine's best tools for balancing a community's needs and desires for future growth.

#### Additional Resources

[The Great American Neighborhood – A Guide to Livable Design](#)

[A Pattern Language](#) Christopher Alexander

[Visions for a New American Dream](#) Anton Nelessen

[The Next American Metropolis](#) Peter Calthorpe