Summary

The City of Gig Harbor chose a combination of innovative strategies for planning and controlling encroaching development on their historic small town. This includes strict zoning regulation and design standards which are imposed on residential as well as commercial development.

Specifically, in 1996, after keeping Wal-Mart and Fred Meyer out of the retail core, Gig Harbor made a commitment to preserving the character of their historic waterfront community by creating strict guidelines for large retail development. Gig Harbor set aside one 500-acre parcel of land 2 miles outside of the downtown area for large retail development. This is the only area of town where large retail is allowed, albeit with detailed and incredibly specific design guidelines. All other commercial development within the city limits is capped at 35,000 square feet. Additionally, the large retailers have been required to provide mitigation and community amenities in exchange for the opportunity to come into Gig Harbor. These include building roads, traffic circles, adhering to guidelines for preservation of open space, storm water management, and the construction of nearby parks.

The benefits of this strategy come in many forms depending upon the perspective. The City of Gig Harbor has benefited by keeping residents’ shopping within the city limits. This has equated to augmentation in the tax base, which is visible in the number and magnitude of new civic projects that have been recently implemented. Additionally, since the development, called Gig Harbor North, has been carefully designed and regulated, the visual impact upon the residential and tourist centers of town has been minimal or nonexistent. With the exception of one small business, most retailers in the retail core and town center areas agreed that their businesses have not seen a significant decline in sales since Gig Harbor North was completed in 2000. The sacrifice for the town has been in designating a prime parcel of land for large retail development, but it can be argued that this strategy of “controlling the inevitable” is a successful story for the city, retailers, and property owners in the area.

Gig Harbor’s strategies for the regulation of large retail shopping within the city limits can be extrapolated to the City of Homer in several ways. Like Homer, Gig Harbor has also struggled with the proposition of large retail corporations planning to compromise the community identity of their unique village of fishermen, artists and small businesses. What has developed is a framework built on tight design guidelines and zoning regulations, combined with a 35,000 square foot cap on any development outside of the small Gig Harbor North retail core. By utilizing the lessons learned in Gig Harbor, the City of Homer will be more likely to create a vision for growth which plans for utmost control over what does and does not enter the community, while also preserving the unique character that is utterly Homer, Alaska.
Community Background

Location - Gig Harbor is located on the bay 47 miles South of Seattle at the southeastern side of the Olympic Penninsula.

Size – 6,500 inhabitants, 66,000 in Key Penninsula area

Economic Base –
Fishing and tourism

Governing/Planning Structure – The city of Gig Harbor is a 14-square mile area governed by an elected mayor and a seven-member council and managed by a city administrator (See Appendix A).

New Town or Existing –
Existing town with a new town retail district located outside of the historic district.

Gig Harbor’s history is a rich tapestry of fishing, mills, farms, steamboats, ferries and bridges. As the area thrived and population increased, steamboats, car ferries, and the Tacoma Narrows Bridge, linked the Olympic Penninsula to Tacoma and the rest of Washington State.

Gig Harbor, the Olympic Penninsula’s playground, is filled with inspiring locations and scenery that set an unparalleled backdrop for tourism.

With miles of shoreline and deep water bays, Gig Harbor is famous for water sports and boating of all kinds. Gig Harbor also offers a large network of cycling and walking trails. A huge variety of festivals and cultural events are held every month of the year.
Gig Harbor offers visitors more than 20 bed and breakfasts to choose from as well as inns, hotels, and motels. A public boat dock is located downtown with three boat launches close by. Wind surfers will want to visit Hederson Bay. Here the “spit” serves as a launch point for the bright colored sails, jet skis, sun bathing and swimming. The muddy waters beneath the Narrows Bridge are a destination for scuba divers, yielding some of the world's largest octopi. Clamming and shell collecting are favorite beach time activities. Boat charters and fishing charters are available around the Bay.

Shopping in Gig Harbor is divided into 6 business districts along the waterfront including a large selection of art galleries, antiques, books, jewelry, coffee shops, and restaurants.

The community is mainly composed of retired people, tourists, students, and the locals who have chosen Gig Harbor as their home. As recently as 1986, the city population to jobs ratio was 2.59 to one - worse than the state average, but better than the county and area average. PSRC data, however, shows that from 1990 to 2010 the ratio is/will be close to 6 people to one local job, essentially twice as undesirable as the county average. This statistic explains why so many local vehicles cross the bridge to go to work (PS Research Council 1989).

Job creation is a prime goal of the city’s Comprehensive Plan. 2.5 people to one local job is a goal. With this in mind, the area north of the city shop on Skansie Avenue, and the Gig Harbor North area, and the available city commercial space have been zoned for this change (City of Gig Harbor Comprehensive Plan 1994).

The Comprehensive Plan promotes home-based business, small business start-ups, property revitalization, public/private ventures, and protection of commercial and business districts from over-zoning. The city will focus on the individual needs of business neighborhoods as well as on development. In general, the town has more similarities with Homer than it does differences.

**Positions and Actions on Large-Store Retail**

The City of Gig Harbor has been presented with numerous offers from large-store retail corporations planning to build in the downtown retail district. This has been met with immense public opposition, including a petition of 14,000 people, which succeeded in keeping Wal-Mart out of the town. As mentioned in the summary, Gig Harbor has created a comprehensive plan, coupled with strict zoning and design guidelines, which allow the community control over what types of development are allowed. By using creative and well-constructed zoning regulations, large-store retail (over 35,000 square feet) is only permitted in one parcel within the city limits (City of Gig Harbor Zoning Plan 1997). As of today, Gig Harbor is planning to set aside no additional space for large-
store retail. Thus, they are further controlling the amount of large retail permitted within the town limits.

Since 1996, the City of Gig Harbor has required a long and detailed design review process, and Design Review options apply to all areas of the city. This immediately limits certain businesses which are unwilling to go through the process or that are uncompromising in meeting design guidelines. Design review facilitates early and on-going communication among property owners, adjacent property interests, the community, and city planners, while increasing public awareness of design issues and options. Further, design review provides an objective basis for decisions that address the visual impact of future growth and ensures that development standards established in the 1994 City of Gig Harbor Comprehensive Plan (attached) will be met. Several areas, including the Historic District, downtown, all waterfront districts, and the area bordered by Harborview Drive-Rosedale-Stinson, have special and stricter design requirements (City of Gig Harbor Design Manual 1996).

All commercial development must consider their effects and mediation of streetscapes, landscape and screening, traffic, building lighting, building facades, building scale and mass (must be broken down if over 35,000 square feet), parking, siding and trim, roofing material and architectural devices, and setbacks (see appendix and Design Manual for more detail). There are also standards for how much green space must be preserved and for providing community gathering space within the new development (City of Gig Harbor Design Manual 1996).
Outcomes

Through well-developed zoning and design guidelines, the City of Gig Harbor has been able to preserve the vitality of their downtown retail core as well as their unique community identity, while also providing a space for large retail development.

One major effect of allowing large-retail development into the city has been in the economic sector. Impact fees are charged to new development to pay a share of the costs of local infrastructure expansion associated with this new growth. This has equated to new roads, traffic circles, a new City Hall and skate park, among other civic projects. Impact fees are a part of a funding picture that also includes grants and local tax dollars in a mix of funds intended to support local standards of development. In other parts of the country, impact fees are assessed to help develop new capacity for water, sewer, roads, parks, schools, emergency services and other infrastructure. In Washington state, local governments can assess parks, transportation and school impact fees for the development of new growth-related capacity.

Despite the economic slowdown plaguing the region, the city experienced another double digit increase (13%) in sales taxes in 2002. New store openings and sales taxes continued to fuel the growth in sales taxes. Construction activities, including the sale of building materials account for 34% of sales tax receipts. Retail sales, including restaurants, vehicles and fuel, are approximately 38% of receipts. The balance is provided by the transportation, insurance, finance, and service industries (City of Gig Harbor Budget 2003).

The Gig Harbor North development is composed of retail, services, restaurants, and city offices. Using topography and massing, the development has been designed to feel more like a small mountain shopping village than a large-retail shopping park. With the exception of the Target parking lot, the parking areas are vegetated, and kept to a scale which fits the feel of the area. Pedestrians move easily and safely between the stores and amongst the parking due to very obvious and expansive paving patterns. Trails through forested
areas connect different parts of the development, and are lined with benches and picnic tables for relaxing. Signage is tightly regulated with most stores having a small sign engraved into a stone block. Additionally, traffic is regulated by traffic circles which have been paid for by the businesses themselves.

This strategy of planning for growth, while creating regulations which also limit and control it, has been a successful strategy for the small town of Gig Harbor, Washington. It is our opinion that the City of Homer will be able to extract ideas from this strategy in planning for their future whether that includes large-retail or not.

References

City of Gig Harbor, Budget 2003.

City of Gig Harbor, Comprehensive Plan, 1996.

City of Gig Harbor, Design Manual, 1996.


Appendices

Appendix A: Selected Design Guidelines

Appendix B: Design Review Application Process

Note: A complete copy of the design guidelines and other useful information is provided in a separate binder with the Extended Resources that was provided with this summary.
Appendix A: Selected Design Guidelines (See binder for full guidelines)

- Link commercial buildings and the public right-of-way with primary walkways
- Assure that primary walkway width is proportionate to scale of project
- Differentiate walkway surface
- Accent walkway with lighting and seating areas
- Identify historic events or structures
- Accent walkway with significant landscaping
- Link each building with walkways
- Provide common area of a size proportionate to development
- Locate common areas in view corridors
- Take advantage of common area credits
- Consider allowed activities in common areas
- Locate structure on front setback line
- Orient service and delivery areas away from the street
- Limit the number of curb cuts
- Place no more than 50% of required parking in front of buildings
- Orient active uses to the street
- Respect scale of adjacent structures
- Align bottom edge of awnings
- Provide full screening or partial screening with glimpse-through areas
- Screen or enhance parking lots visible from highway
- Screen or enhance building design
- Incorporate 20% of significant vegetation into the site plan
- Protect existing trees during construction
- Use vines or shrubs on blank walls
- Limit clearing to no more than 50% of significant vegetation and retain vegetation in all required buffers and setbacks
- Limit chain link fence to non-visible areas
- Limit height of fences
- Avoid site designs which emphasize pavements, canopies or mechanical equipment
- Coordinate development at intersections abutting prominent parcels
- Incorporate pedestrian ways into parking lot
- Provide continuous tree canopy throughout larger parking lots
- Receive DRB approval for parking structures over one story or which enclose 20 or more vehicles
- Keep light sources hidden from public view
- Use downward directional lighting
- Avoid lighting large areas with a single source
- Avoid light fixture designs which have an industrial appearance
- Choose canvas or mesh fabric umbrellas
- Avoid cantilevered designs
- Determine allowable building height from any point within setback area
- Respect natural topography
- Avoid back-lit panels and awnings; avoid colored lighting on buildings
Appendix B: Design Review Application Process

Site Plan Review
- Site plan
- Vegetation plan
- Landscape plan
- Site section drawings
- Grading and drainage plan
- Utilities plan

Landscaping and Paving Review
- Final landscape plan
- Irrigation plan
- Paving materials

Architectural Design Review
- Elevation drawings
- Sign plan
- Architectural lighting detail
- Screening details

Color and Material Review
- Color palette
- Materials samples
- Fencing details

Outdoor Lighting and Accessories Review
- Light fixture details
- Accessory details