

## SULTAN CITY COUNCIL AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

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**ITEM NO:** D-2  
**DATE:** April 27, 2010  
**SUBJECT:** Define Small Town Character  
**CONTACT PERSON:** Deborah Knight, City Administrator

### **ISSUE:**

The issue before the city council and planning board is to discuss the term “small town character” and whether to define the term for the City of Sultan.

### **STAFF RECOMMENDATION:**

1. Review land use goal LU-1 and the 1994 Vision Statement.
2. Discuss the need to define the term “small town character” during the 2011 comprehensive plan update.
3. Provide direction to staff.

### **SUMMARY:**

The 1994 Vision Statement opens with the goal to “maintain a small town feeling”.

The revised goal (LU-3) in the Land Use Element of the comprehensive plan states:

“Preserve the existing small town character of Sultan while accommodating the state’s 20-year growth forecast for Sultan.”

Given these two statements, maintaining and preserving Sultan’s small town character seems important to the community. During discussion of the Land Use Element goals and policies, the planning board asked staff to define “small town character”. Unfortunately, there are no specific guidelines or definitions to assist the city in defining what “small town character” means to this community.

### Why Define Small Town?

A website resource noted, small towns have many dimensions that make them unique: environmental resources like streams, farms, and vistas; cultural resources that give a place its flavor; and social patterns that define "small town" lifestyles. These can be very mundane things: casual run-ins at the post office, or an empty lot with a view to the mountains. These things define the town’s daily social and aesthetic experience.

Not formally recognizing their importance in our daily life leaves open the possibility that changes erase them. The details of these things can inform the design of a new roadway or housing development.

Ultimately, defining what small town character means to Sultan residents can ensure that the amenities that brought us to Sultan and the sense of community that keep us here need to be maintained as Sultan continues to grow.

Defining the special and unique characteristics will ensure they are preserved.

### What is Small Town Character?

Defining “small town character” may be like the Supreme Court defining “obscenity”. As Justice Potter Stewart noted in 1964, “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced . . . [b]ut I know it when I see it . . . ”

Attachment A provides a list of amenities that define desirable small town characteristics from the website “small town gems”<sup>1</sup> Sultan has several of the amenities identified on the list, but certainly we are a long ways from becoming a “gem” and perhaps achieving “gem” status isn’t even the community’s goal.

### How to Define Small Town Character?

One of the more enjoyable activities in updating the comprehensive plan is to take time to understand where we are today and to let loose and imagine what we can become tomorrow.

In order to identify, preserve, and enhance Sultan’s small town character we need to agree as a community what is collectively important.

The planning board discussed this issue at length during its April 6, 2010 meeting and recommends inviting the community to participate in defining Sultan’s small town character.

### Alternatives

1. **Taking it to the streets** – Since most people know “small town character” when they see it, a number of communities have provided disposal cameras to key stakeholders and sent them out into the community to record their impressions of small town character. The recorded images are used to craft a definition and build support for maintaining specific community amenities. This exercise can take several weeks to a month to complete, but is a way to build community support. The photos can be posted on the city’s website and used in the comprehensive plan. The city council and planning board could participate in the exercise and jointly review the images gathered. A 10-pack of disposable cameras is approximately \$50.00.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.smalltowngems.com/aboutus/desirablesmalltown.html>

2. **Stakeholder interviews and surveys** – Bill Grimes with Studio Cascade will be meeting with residents, business owners and other stakeholders May 3 – May 5. This is an opportunity to ask community members to define what amenities and characteristics make Sultan special. Mr. Grimes will have a summary of the stakeholder interviews to the city by the end of May. The interviews are already included in the scope of work so there is no additional cost to gather people's thoughts on small town character.
3. **Planning board outreach** - The planning board has been successful in leading the outreach effort on the Park and Recreation Open Space (PROS) Plan. The planning board has met with a dozen local groups to talk about the PROS Plan and gather community input on the current and future state of the city's park system. The planning board could be tasked with meeting with stakeholders to get community feedback on small town character. The cost to this approach is minimal since the planning board members are volunteers. The city council should recognize the planning board's achievement as "good-will" ambassadors. The board's work on the PROS Plan has been outstanding.

#### **FISCAL IMPACT:**

The fiscal impact depends on the alternative selected. The most expensive approach would be to use digital cameras, but it is also the most creative and engaging alternative. The city could equip 40 people with cameras for \$200.00. We could also ask people to take their own digital photos and send the pictures to the city.

Stakeholder interviews and planning board outreach could be accomplished for little or no charge.

The council and planning board may want to consider using all three approaches to ensure the widest possible response to identifying Sultan's small town character.

#### **RECOMMENDED ACTION:**

1. Review land use goal LU-1 and the 1994 Vision Statement.
2. Discuss the need to define the term "small town character" during the 2011 comprehensive plan update.
3. Provide direction to staff.

#### **ATTACHMENT**

A- What is a "desirable small town"

B – Small town characteristics (provided by Sherri Harris)

## WHAT IS A 'DESIRABLE' SMALL TOWN?

How do we describe the ambiance or personality of the towns on this website? The adjectives historic, small, quaint, charming, romantic come to mind. Or we could employ the phrases “a step back in time”, “picture postcard” or “small town Americana at its best”. Many have historic districts, attractive store fronts on Main Street, antique shops, art stores or other boutiques, Victorian homes, bed and breakfast lodging. Because of their distinctive quality, numerous towns on our website were Hollywood film locations.

As you enter these towns, they should pass the following emotional tests:

1. *Does this remind you of a Currier and Ives print?*
2. *Do you think to yourself “I can’t wait to tell my friends about this place”?*
3. *Do you wonder if there is enough capacity in your camera?*
4. *Is this place similar to the town where your grandmother was raised?*

The following criteria are used to earn our approval:

- ◆ Distinctive Architecture
- ◆ Part of the downtown has been designated a state or national historic district
- ◆ Numerous stone or brick buildings in downtown
- ◆ Pedestrian/bicyclist friendly
- ◆ County seat with historic courthouse
- ◆ Lampposts along the main thoroughfare
- ◆ Fountains
- ◆ Abundant tree and flower landscaping
- ◆ Art galleries, antique stores, or specialty boutiques
- ◆ Small college or university in or near the town
- ◆ Bed-and-breakfast lodging, usually in Victorian or Bungalow-style housing
- ◆ Gourmet coffee shops and/or bakery
- ◆ Clock towers
- ◆ Brick/cobblestone sidewalks or streets
- ◆ A river or canal through the downtown
- ◆ Proximate to a lake or ocean
- ◆ Bike or walking path
- ◆ Clean, easily accessible public restrooms
- ◆ Wooden picket or wrought iron fences
- ◆ Wrought iron railings on upper-story balconies
- ◆ Unusual scenery nearby
- ◆ Vintage train station with locomotive and caboose
- ◆ Iron or covered bridges
- ◆ Tourist trolley buses and horse-drawn carriages
- ◆ Abundant and decorative trash receptacles
- ◆ Vintage service station with antique vehicles

# Sultan Small Town Character



Building facades are staggered to provide visual interest.

Offset building planes and recessed areas of building facades provide relief to long elevations and create shade and shadow patterns.

Mini-Plaza development between buildings.

