

# Hopeful Urbanism: Human-Scale Neighborhoods More Necessary Than Ever

By Jon Ford / Senior associate, community design

---

June 9, 2025

As Providence hosts the 33<sup>rd</sup> [Congress for the New Urbanism](https://www.cnu.org/what-we-do/congress) (<https://www.cnu.org/what-we-do/congress>) from June 11-14, it's a good time to reflect on the value of human-scale neighborhoods as an essential response to the evolving needs of our society. Human-scale neighborhoods — places that are compact, mixed-use, and walkable — offer practical solutions to today's economic, environmental, and social challenges. The blueprint for a better connected and more equitable future is all around us in the DNA of some of our most well-loved (and well-functioning) New England places.

Human-scale neighborhoods do more with less and thus make economic sense. For individuals, proximity to jobs and daily needs offers more than just convenience; it can reduce or eliminate the stress of commuting long distances, especially for those more financially vulnerable. For municipalities, focusing development and redevelopment to compact, human-scale places means more efficient infrastructure and lower maintenance costs — especially critical now as our cities and towns grapple with the twin challenges of stretched municipal budgets and decades of deferred infrastructure maintenance.

The national housing shortage has made creating and supporting neighborhoods that more gracefully accommodate diverse needs more urgent. Human-scale communities can address this crisis by more easily accommodating a range of housing options and welcoming additional density. For example, Massachusetts' MBTA Communities Law

requires municipalities to zone for multifamily housing near transit hubs, encouraging density near transit-oriented development.

Human-scale neighborhoods are compact and green. At the watershed scale, compact development in areas served by infrastructure (aka smart growth (<https://smartgrowthamerica.org/what-is-smart-growth/>)) promotes sustainability by reducing the cumulative footprint of development while at the same time striving for maximum conservation and restoration of natural systems. Within neighborhoods themselves, reduced emissions, integrated green spaces, and benefits like mitigating urban heat island effects and reducing stormwater runoff are the keys to sustainability and environmental health.

Human-scale neighborhoods are mixed-use and pedestrian friendly. With homes, shops, schools, and parks all within easy reach by foot or bike, and a strong focus on a safe and welcoming public realm (parks, streets, civic spaces), everyday experiences and encounters build social connections and strengthen a neighborhood over time. While sprawling, low-density areas often resist new development due to fears of congestion or loss of character, human-scale, walkable neighborhoods absorb change more naturally. New homes or businesses add to the vitality of the whole, reinforcing a cycle of organic, place-based growth.

Mashpee Commons on Cape Cod offers an example of how human-scale, walkable design can succeed in a variety of settings. What began as the reinvention of a 1960s strip mall evolved into a dynamic mixed-use village designed to become a traditional New England town center. A New Urbanism (<https://www.cnu.org/resources/what-new-urbanism>) pioneer and early smart growth model, Mashpee Commons features walkable streets and a mix of housing, shops, restaurants, and civic spaces, reflecting core principles championed by New Urbanists.

Currently a thriving regional commercial draw, recent emphasis has been on adding much-needed residential units alongside commercial growth. The approach addresses regional housing shortages while integrating infrastructure that protects the local ecosystem. First and foremost, the project's status as a grayfield redevelopment provides tremendous environmental benefit compared to comparable greenfield development. An early investment in on-site wastewater treatment anchors an environmental infrastructure legacy, underscoring long-term foresight.

While Mashpee Commons illustrates how larger-scale development can create connected, walkable neighborhoods, smaller infill “missing middle” residential projects like Cottages on Greene and Castle Street Cottages in East Greenwich show how thoughtful design can help knit multifamily housing into existing communities. These two “cottage court” mini-neighborhoods cluster small homes around a shared green space, fostering close connections. Drawing on traditional local architecture, the projects fit into their historic surroundings while incorporating sustainable features like energy-efficient heating and stormwater systems. Cottages on Greene won a CNU Charter Award and Castle Street Cottages earned a Best in American Living Award, exemplifying how compact, human-scale neighborhoods preserve character, encourage social interaction, and support environmental responsibility.

Beyond housing and commercial centers, Providence's Woonasquatucket Greenway improvements show how public infrastructure investment can help reconnect communities. The project consists of the upgrade of a mile segment of the 7-mile Greenway and includes a new off-street urban trail along the river, two new pocket parks, two new kayak launches, and extensive tree planting and green stormwater infrastructure. The project corridor is gradually transitioning from its long industrial history and subsequent post-industrial disinvestment to accommodate new uses, including arts facilities, community spaces, and additional residents. The Greenway improvements are a step in a long and complicated process, especially with its extensive public engagement process and intent to benefit vulnerable populations with

safer streets, more ways to get around, better access to the river, and welcoming public spaces. These elements combine to create social connectivity and improved mental health, cleaner water, and reduced heat island effect.

The upcoming Congress for the New Urbanism in Providence is a chance to share ideas, learn from success stories both old and new, and deepen our understanding of how places built for people can help us adapt socially, environmentally, and collectively to a rapidly changing world.

*Jon Ford, P.E., is a senior associate for community design at the Horsley Witten Group.*

The views expressed in this opinion piece do not necessarily reflect those of ecoRI News or its board of directors. ecoRI News publishes a diversity of opinions from the community. To submit an opinion piece, visit our opinion submission page, which includes guidelines and instructions for sending in your submission.  
(<https://ad.broadstreetads.com/click/823094/c546017/z152035?>)

## Categories

OPINION

**Join the Discussion**

VIEW COMMENTS