



# COMMUNITY DESIGN

14



## COMMUNITY DESIGN

This chapter defines the desired sense of community character and identity for the City of Beckley. It considers historic roots and unique “placemaking” elements that make Beckley unique and distinctive. It also considers how Beckley can promote an identity that is unique and authentic to its roots. Defining and celebrating this identity will help create a “sense of place” and helps support larger efforts to draw people to Beckley.

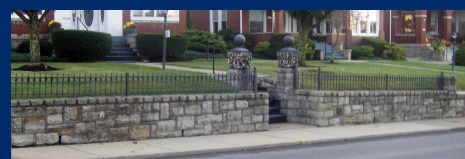
“It’s really hard to design products by focus groups. A lot of times, people don’t know what they want until you show it to them.”

- Steve Jobs

## 14.

## URBAN DESIGN ELEMENTS

Foundational urban design elements can be found in Beckley's history. In and near downtown, many older homes can be found that represented design skills and preferences from early residents. Most notably, there are many walls, foundations and buildings in southern West Virginia that were built by skilled Italian stone masons. In Beckley, there are many stone walls along streets such as N. and S. Kanawha. The walls adjacent to sidewalks are functional as they serve as retaining walls to address slope issues and, they are attractive architectural features that help define a sense of place and local character.



Many examples of fine stone masonry work is found on the campus of UC Beckley and along Kanawha Street.



## The City of Beckley should celebrate the work of early stone masons in the following ways:

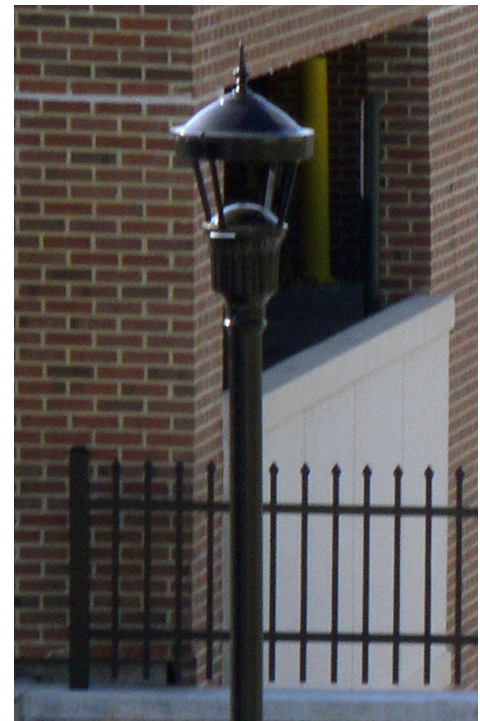
- Discourage removal of stone walls and encourage repair efforts as a matter of general municipal policy.
- Consider opportunities to replicate the work of early Italian stone masons in new public buildings as appropriate and contextual.
- Encourage private development activity to incorporate elements in new development and renovations. This can relate to new retaining walls for surface parking areas, landscape features, walkways, building foundations, entry features and related considerations. Potential amendments to the site plan review procedures and requirements would help to add these considerations to the process by which site plans are approved.

# 14.2

## OTHER URBAN DESIGN ELEMENTS

The recent completion of the BIG project is significant in many obvious ways. A more subtle aspect of this project is that it includes many design choices for types of street furniture, lighting fixtures and landscape materials. These design choices help to define urban spaces and create visual cues.

Use of these recent design choices should be replicated elsewhere in Downtown Beckley to help visually connect the BIG project with the balance of the downtown. This can happen as new benches, light fixtures and other landscape materials are chosen to replace damaged or non-working elements. This issue is addressed more fully in Chapter 15 with respect to downtown.



# 14.3

## URBAN DESIGN AND PRIVATE DEVELOPMENT

Some communities have adopted guidelines to describe and articulate desired urban form, materials, and design. These guidelines can apply to significant corridors, gateways or other important places in a community, or can simply relate to city-wide standards, tied to specific zoning districts. The guidelines themselves define general principles of good urban form and design. They can address issues related to façade design, minimum amounts of window glazing, entry way design, signage placement, use of awnings, appropriate building mass, roof lines, screening of parking areas and dumpsters, landscape treatments, definition of pedestrian paths and amenities, design of loading and service entries, site lighting and parking lot design. Guidelines such as these can be embodied in site plan review requirements, or can be incorporated into a separate document.

Typically, the most successful guidelines are exactly that – guidelines that point developers and property owners toward essential elements of good design. For example, they may require use of multiple exterior building materials and a maximum amount of wall surfaces that can be constructed without windows or doors. They may require pitched roofs in certain areas and prescribe landscape treatments to buffer and screen. They often stop short of offering specific choices, designs or prototypes. The goal is to create places that are visually rich and appealing, not to pre-design buildings or sites in great detail. Often, guiding principles are defined, along with some description of intended outcomes. Architects, builders and property owners are then asked to interpret and apply the general guidelines to site-specific conditions.

The City of Beckley does not provide significant levels of guidance with respect to the design of private development. Obviously, steps in this direction should only be taken with careful thought, and with an eye toward balancing private property rights with the need to encourage good design as new structures are built or remodeled. The design of future buildings in Beckley is an important topic that extends beyond simply the aesthetic appearance of structures. There are many positive economic benefits to be realized through good design choices, along with the advancement of many goals expressed in this Comprehensive Plan. In most respects, the need to create a quality community is connected to the need to create well-designed buildings and places.

Future actions that can be taken to explore this issue should originate from the Beckley Planning Commission and/or Beckley City Council. These actions should explore sample design guidelines from elsewhere and best practices. Work elements can also include considering alternative regulatory approaches and mechanisms to achieve desired results. Approaches may even include advisory design guidelines that can be used to encourage proper action and steps from property owners and developers.

# 14.4

## WAYFINDING SIGNAGE

One aspect of urban design is the experience offered by a community through its architecture, urban form and transportation systems. This is particularly important to visitors who are unfamiliar with local roads, landmarks and points of interest. In many ways, the visitor is a guest in a community and it is important to make them feel comfortable, safe and confident in their travels in a new place. Visitors who feel relaxed traveling through a community are far more likely to form favorable impressions and enjoy their experience. Conversely, visitors who feel lost and disoriented can become frustrated and leave, with no intention to return. To support and encourage positive visitor experiences, many communities have developed strategic wayfinding systems that intentionally guide people to important destinations and direct visitor travel. Additionally, these wayfinding systems offer an opportunity to help reinforce and support local branding efforts with carefully chosen colors and graphics.

In Beckley, this matter is particularly important as local roads often meander around topography and it can be difficult for visitors to stay oriented. For this reason, the 2001 Comprehensive Plan recommended the development of a wayfinding signage system for Beckley. This system was subsequently designed and installed. It includes gateway signage at significant points of arrival and directional signage at decision points throughout town.

Looking forward, it is realized that Beckley's wayfinding requires maintenance and enhancement to continue to perform at a high level. In particular, the following improvements are recommended:

- Enlarge the lettering to a font size that is more visible from a greater distance.
- In some cases, reduce the number of destinations identified to reduce the complexity of the sign and offer better readability.
- Consider placing signs prior to intersections as opposed to on the far side of the intersection, so that they can be read while people are waiting at stop lights or signs.
- Add foundational elements, or improved installation practices to sustain the signs in an upright position.
- At appropriate locations, incorporate the historic stone materials as sign bases to support city image.

