

## COMMON GROUND FOR DEVELOPMENT

By: [R. Kymn Harp](#)

A story I heard growing up:

*When my grandfather was 10 years old he found a penny. With that penny he bought a pencil. He sharpened that pencil then sold it for two cents. He took that two cents and bought two more pencils, sharpened them and sold them for four cents. He reinvested his four cents in four more pencils, sharpened them and sold them for eight cents. Then, again, he bought eight more pencils, sharpened them and sold them for sixteen cents. This went on until my grandfather had amassed \$10.24. That's when my great Aunt Sophie died and left us her portfolio of shopping centers, office buildings and rental homes. Our family has been in the real estate business ever since.*

The story isn't true, but it taught four valuable lessons: 1) Sweat equity is a powerful tool; 2) If you reinvest your earnings, wealth can grow geometrically; 3) The BIG money is in real estate; and 4) It would be nice to have a rich Aunt Sophie.

Like most families, we didn't have a rich Aunt Sophie, so my parents focused on lessons 1, 2 and 3.

I mention this story as a backdrop. My life growing up was always about real estate. My parents were each real estate investors and developers. My father focused on commercial real estate, while my mother focused on residential real estate. It was through them that I gained my interest in real estate development.

My mother cared about *quality of life* issues. Comfortable homes. Neighborhood parks. Safe streets. Good schools. Museums and other cultural enhancements. As a residential real estate investor, developer and broker, my mother focused on *living environments*. If families were going to live in her neighborhoods, then the neighborhoods had to be *family friendly*.

My father's realm was commercial real estate. His talent was seeing early opportunities for development. He would assemble land, put in infrastructure, and create new developments, or find ways to adapt and reuse outdated commercial and industrial buildings to give them new life. In either case he wanted his projects to be where the people were, to give them a place to work and to play. He was remarkably creative.

# Buchalter

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As you might imagine, with my father focused on commercial development in or near neighborhoods and my mother focused on residential quality of life issues, conversations around the dinner table were always interesting and sometimes a bit edgy.

On one side of the table, my father believed that communities needed ready access to grocery stores, retail centers, professional services, restaurants, and places to be entertained. The best locations were always near homes and apartments.

On the other side was my mother insisting upon neighborhoods with comfortable homes, safe streets, parks and other open areas, dry basements, clean air, clean water, and minimal noise and light pollution.

According to conventional wisdom derived from public zoning board and plan commission hearings and community planning group meetings when commercial development is proposed near existing homes and neighborhoods, one might expect a clash of ideas turning into heated challenges and demands to forego development. Fortunately, our dinner table was nothing like many public hearings.

My mother and father each respected the vision of the other and understood the natural symbiotic relationship between residential and commercial development. Instead of complaining that one was trying to destroy the vision of the other, they anticipated each other's legitimate development and environmental needs and sought reasonable accommodation when possible. Sometimes they couldn't agree, but there was always a meaningful attempt to understand the viewpoint of the other, exchange ideas, and come to a mutually respectful and workable plan.

My mother was a resourceful advocate. She made my father think about how commercial development would impact residential neighbors and plan ways to mitigate adverse consequences on families. Long before coming into their current vogue, I learned at our family dinner table the concept of developing live/work/play environments and residential/commercial mixed-use developments.

The point for commercial developers and residential advocates is that they should each turn down the volume of their development debate and respectfully listen to what the other is saying. When the other has presented legitimate concerns or needs, those concerns and needs should be reasonably accommodated where possible. An idealistic dream? Perhaps. But I grew up watching it work.

To be sure, not all expressed concerns are legitimate and not all proposed accommodations are possible. In those cases, resolution must necessarily be left up to public plan commissions, zoning boards, and municipal trustees or alderpersons to arbitrate and

decide the debate. As guardians of the public welfare entrusted with promoting the best interests of the community at large, they must decide. In a fair and evenhanded political environment, your best bet for prevailing is to demonstrate that you have listened with respect and have made reasonable and conscientious efforts to promote public harmony rather than discord.

POINT: If you are a commercial real estate developer proposing a commercial development near existing residential neighborhoods, don't pretend they don't exist. Think about how they will be impacted and include in your development plan ways to mitigate any adverse consequences created by your development. Talk to your residential neighbors. Listen to what they have to say. They are not *ALL* crazy. Sometimes (often, actually) they have legitimate concerns about real problems. If you can include in your development plan a way to economically fix a problem they already have (such as flooding, blight, inadequate parking, lack of sufficient parks or playgrounds, poor traffic circulation, etc.), your opportunities to move forward will increase.