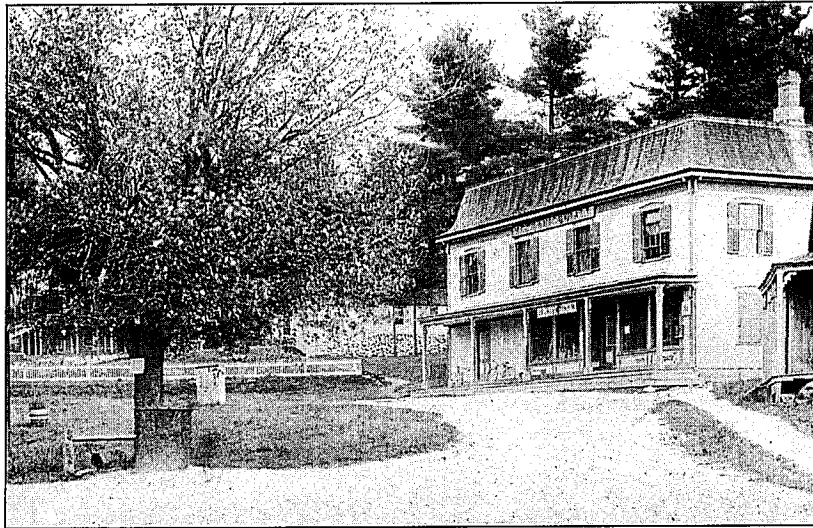


Develop Village Centers



A view of East Rindge's Mechanics Hall, site of many village activities near the turn of the century (photo courtesy of Rindge Historical Society).

By the early 1870s, East Rindge had taken shape as a distinct village, clustered near the woodenware mills lining the north branch of the Miller's River. Residents still felt the need, though, for something more—beyond their jobs and the location of their houses—to bring them together. In 1874 a group of them pooled their resources to purchase a sizable two-story building. Known as Mechanics Hall, the structure housed a new post office, a library, and a small store, as well as a kitchen and a large “audience room” on the second floor.

Neighbors chatted with each other at the post office, while children pressed up to the penny candy counter in the store. In winter, young and old alike gathered around the warmth of a big wood stove on the ground level. Upstairs, members of the local Grange assembled for meetings and a wide variety of other activities, including lectures, theatricals, suppers and card parties, entertained the general public.

Supporters of this approach feel those East Rindgers had good instincts. First of all, they believed in the value of community, something writer Wendell Berry has described as “more permanent and dearer than cash, and harder to replace, once lost.” Second, they realized that a community needs a center, some sort of “centripetal force,” as Berry puts it, that pulls people in to do their daily business, exchange news and gossip, have fun, and in the process get to know each other as neighbors and fellow citizens.

But there is less evidence of these instincts at work in the recent history of our town. This is partly due to differences in the ways we work and spend our free time, as well in the ways land is developed for residential and commercial use. As mentioned earlier, Rindge has experienced a good deal of “low-density” growth over the past 30 years or so. Left to run its course, this type of development—often called “sprawl” by its critics—tends to produce communities that are diffused, fragmented, and without a center. In addition, a series of local decisions, apparently unconnected and each made on its own merits, has contributed to making Rindge one of what author John Herbers calls “big new spread-out small towns” (see Figure 10).

However, many people now question the impact of these decentralizing trends and support a more strongly rooted community life. As Jaffrey resident and Harvard Professor Robert Putnam describes in his book, *Bowling Alone*, the “social capital” which comes from



Market Basket Plaza on Route 202 is one aspect of the face of modern life and commerce in Rindge.

tight-knit community bonds is important not only for a vibrant and healthy community, but also for the psychological well-being and physical health of its residents. In increasing numbers all around the country, ordinary citizens are working with interested organizations and local governments to restore a sense of centeredness and common purpose.

Supporters of this approach believe that the spirit of those East Rindge villagers who created Mechanics Hall needs to be revived in our town now. They think that, along with the inevitable growth and change in our future, it is essential that Rindge hold on to its small-town feel and its identity as a community. For that to happen some of the town's traditional centers of community life need to be revitalized and new centers, appropriate to our current ways of living, need to be created.

Revitalize the Common

Unlike many other small towns that have dissolved into roadside clutter as a result of sprawl, Rindge is still distinguished by its beautiful, historic town center. What's more, that center continues to exercise a measure of

"centripetal force," drawing residents in to do business at the town offices, attend events at the Town Hall, and participate in activities like the Memorial Day parade, the pumpkin weigh-off, and the Christmas tree lighting. However, recent decisions have rerouted much of the to-and-fro of everyday life away from the main village common and reduced its importance as a community hub. While some have welcomed this lower level of activity, supporters of this approach believe that one way to strengthen community life in Rindge is to revitalize the common.

The example of the town of Walpole, at the opposite corner of Cheshire County, suggests that action along these lines could work. Like Rindge Center, Walpole village found itself bypassed by a highway that once had run directly through it. Key businesses departed for locations closer to the main flow of traffic. According to one resident, "Main Street looked like the movie set for *High Noon*—deserted, with little activity, and few cars or pedestrians." Now, however, owing to a decade or more of civic action, philanthropic interest in renovation, and the emergence of restaurants and specialty shops, an art gallery, and a branch medical clinic, the village center has again become a magnet for residents and tourists alike.

"The course of... development in the United States has been hostile to an informal public life. We are failing to provide either suitable or sufficient gathering places for it."

Ray Oldenburg,
The Great Good Place

Of course, Rindge is not Walpole, and a town's historic center ought to reflect the community's character. Revitalization efforts in Rindge might take the form of physical improvements, such as sidewalks and lighting, or it might feature the establishment of a historic district or a multipurpose community center. Rindge could also encourage its own sort of specialty enterprises (such as an

antique shop, an ice cream parlor, or perhaps an inn) that harmonize with the center's historic past. Some residents might even want to consider the construction of a senior housing facility close to the common. Whatever direction the revitalization effort might take, it would need to be guided by professional planning and strong neighborhood support.

Develop a New Cultural/Commercial Center

When asked to evaluate the quality of different features of life in Rindge, respondents to the 2020 Survey rated "Cultural Activities" dead last. This response by townspeople, coupled with remarks about too little to do in Rindge by many Franklin Pierce College students and some of the town's high-school age residents, suggest a desire for enterprises such as a studio/performing arts facility, a movie theater, bookstore, coffeehouse or music club. These could be clustered together in a centralized, easily accessible location.

It seems likely that such a "center" would need to be located outside Rindge Center. For one thing, many residents would shudder at the thought of more noise and traffic returning to the common. Also, locating such a center closer to the college would make it more accessible to students. If the new commercial village, possibly in West Rindge, were positioned not only to draw on the resources of Franklin Pierce but also to catch the spillover from the major retail complexes along Route 202, it might provide a dynamic new hub of activity.

The process of developing such a center would undoubtedly require professional planning advice to lay the groundwork and support the vision. Perhaps the costs associated with this could be shared by the college and the town.

Support Creation of Neighborhood and Special Purpose Centers

Another strategy for fostering a sense of community is to provide support for groups of ordinary citizens who want to improve the quality of their own neighborhoods. This is what the residents of East Rindge did in 1874 with Mechanics Hall. More recently, the residents of Acworth, New Hampshire, banded together to save a village store/post office that was about to close. Working outside of local government channels, they crafted a creative funding package (including donations, grants, and a bank loan) and a volunteer labor plan. Now they run, shop, and gather in their own village store.

What similar kinds of things could Rindge residents do in the coming years? Neighborhoods and housing developments might design and develop a volleyball court, a barbecue pit,

1964	Newly established Franklin Pierce College relocates from Rindge Center to rural area adjoining Pearly Pond.
1976	Relocation of town recreation area to new site on Pearly Pond ends an era of ball playing on the common.
1980	Highway traffic is re-routed which from the center to the outskirts of town when Route 202 bypass is completed.
1990	Market Basket Plaza, the first major commercial area in Rindge, opens on Route 202.
1991	Post office relocates from Main Street to Route 119.
1995	A second major commercial development, Wal-Mart, opens on Route 202.
1995	The Village Grocer, a store on the common, closes.

Figure 10. *Decentralizing the Center: Decisions that Changed the Way We Use Our Town Common*

or a gazebo to bring households together for cookouts or other kinds of get-togethers. Lake and mobile home associations or the residents of a senior housing facility might have their own ideas for activities to bring people together. Or perhaps a group with the right expertise—high school and college students, say—might want to design and manage a local "intranet" site, where they and other residents could meet and chat over the electronic equivalent of an old-fashioned cracker barrel. To support such actions, residents might develop a small grants program, administered by an agency in town and funded through donations, local organizations, foundations and banks in the region. The program could be open, on a competitive basis, to all groups with a plan and the willingness to raise matching contributions.

Re-Centralize Residential Development

A stated goal of the 1980 Rindge Master Plan was to "encourage a development pattern which strengthens the identity of the present three centers of Rindge Center, East Rindge, and West Rindge." A decade later the people responsible for creating the 1990 Master Plan acknowledged the failure of this intention and recognized the trend towards "low-density" growth in the area. The report acknowledged that new housing construction had in fact taken place "throughout the town" during the 1980s, and not necessarily around the existing centers. Low

density growth—people locating their homes further and further from already settled areas—has been one of the principal drains on community vitality across the Monadnock region during the 1990s. In order to slow or reverse this pattern of housing choice, it will be necessary to change zoning requirements for cluster development in Rindge.

The zoning ordinance regulating Planned Unit Residential Development (PURD) or cluster housing was designed to conserve open space and fight sprawl. However, the ordinance has had the unintended consequence of directing some home construction to outlying areas of town. This is because Rindge requires a minimum of 20 acres for its cluster development and parcels of that size are typically not available near the centers of towns. If a lower minimum size were to be set—and towns like Harrisville and New Ipswich have established minimums as low as 10 acres—parcels located closer to the village centers would be available for this type of development. It would also be important to

study other adjustments to make sure this ordinance is doing what it was designed to: help ensure cluster development in village centers rather than at the edge of town.

A second option looks further into the future. A UNH study has suggested that a two-tier property tax structure, in which buildings are taxed at a lower rate than the land they occupy, might reduce the attractiveness of large outlying acreages and encourage home buying and home building on smaller properties in more central areas. New Hampshire law does not currently allow municipalities to use the different tax rates, but it is an idea Rindge might want to explore and even lobby for. Of course, neither of these two measures represents a magic bullet, and both need to be studied carefully, with advice from planning and legal experts. But they could give the town tools it does not currently have for working to re-centralize residential development.

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