Built Form & Settlements

Background Report
Plan Review



reVISION Plan Review
Some Community Assembly Required

Contents

What is built form? ---- 1
Building type and size ---- 2
Lot size and building placement ---- 4
Street and streetscapes ---- 6
Built form types ---- 8
Cultural landscapes ---- 13
Density ---- 14
Conclusions ---- 22

What is built form?

Built form refers to how the buildings, the yards, the streets and the public spaces in a community are laid out. Looking at built form helps people know what makes their community look and feel unique. Considering built form helps define – and protect – community character.

Planning is more and more interested in built form. How neighbourhoods are laid out directly affects how places work. For example, towns laid out with good sidewalks and buildings that are close together promote walking. Parks and schools put in the right locations are often neighbourhood hubs. Often, guidelines for built form are combined with architectural guidelines for buildings, in order to create attractive, well-designed communities.



Left: An attractive porch invites people into a shop. Copyright Queen's Printer for Ontario, photo source: Ontario Growth Secretariat, Ministry of Infrastructure

For decades, planning often controlled land use by separating different uses (such as residential, commercial and industrial uses). Zoning by-laws focused heavily on what uses were allowed or not allowed. The physical design of buildings was often secondary, although most codes did have standards for building height, parking and how far buildings should be from property lines. These standards could be generic. They often did not consider local context or how people experienced buildings. This led to buildings or neighbourhoods that did not match their context.

Contemporary planning is often interested in the physical features that make communities pleasant and unique. Rules that identify desired built form can help create new development that fits in villages and rural communities. The first step in talking about built form is knowing what basic patterns affect how communities are laid out. We often speak about:

- building types and sizes
- lot sizes and building placement – where a building is put on its lot
- street design – appropriate street widths and sidewalks widths
- streetscapes – how building design and street design work together to make a street pleasant, safe and attractive
- facades and ground floors
- density - how much building takes place

We can talk about each aspect of built form separately. We can also talk about how aspects work together to create communities that look, feel and function differently. Finally, we can group together streets or neighbourhoods that share certain aspects of built form into specific types.

Building Type and Size

Buildings come in many shapes and sizes. In older settlements, like Chester Village and New Ross, the same basic building type was used for many different activities. For instance, a two story house can be used for many things:

- single family home;
- two or three unit home;
- bed and breakfast;
- restaurant, store, office; or
- ground floor store, housing upstairs.

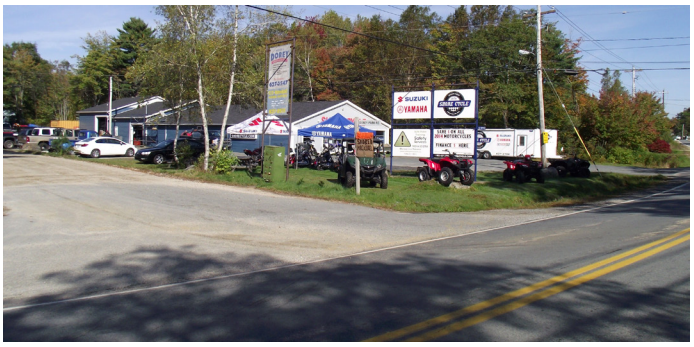
Traditional towns and villages had diverse uses in a few basic building forms. This pattern has become less common since the 1950s.

Common Building Types

- House
- Duplex
- Main street commercial building
- Church
- Schools and institutions
- Barns/ outbuildings
- Sheds/ warehouses
- Highway commercial buildings

Because the Municipality is made of rural areas and a small village, some building types are uncommon, such as attached buildings like townhouses. Some urban building types are completely absent, including large apartment buildings and towers. Additionally, some buildings are recognized as heritage properties for their rarity and their architectural and historical importance.









Top: Main street commercial buildings on Pleasant Street in Chester Village. **Second:** Highway commercial building in Martins Point. **Third:** Single unit house in a rural subdivision. **Bottom:** A large industrial warehouse in Martins Point.

Building Size and Height

A building's height, length and shape are key to whether a building fits in with its setting. Changing building size and shape can dramatically affect how a building looks, and how it feels to be in a place. Each community has proper building heights and shapes. Studying existing buildings helps determine what size buildings are suitable.

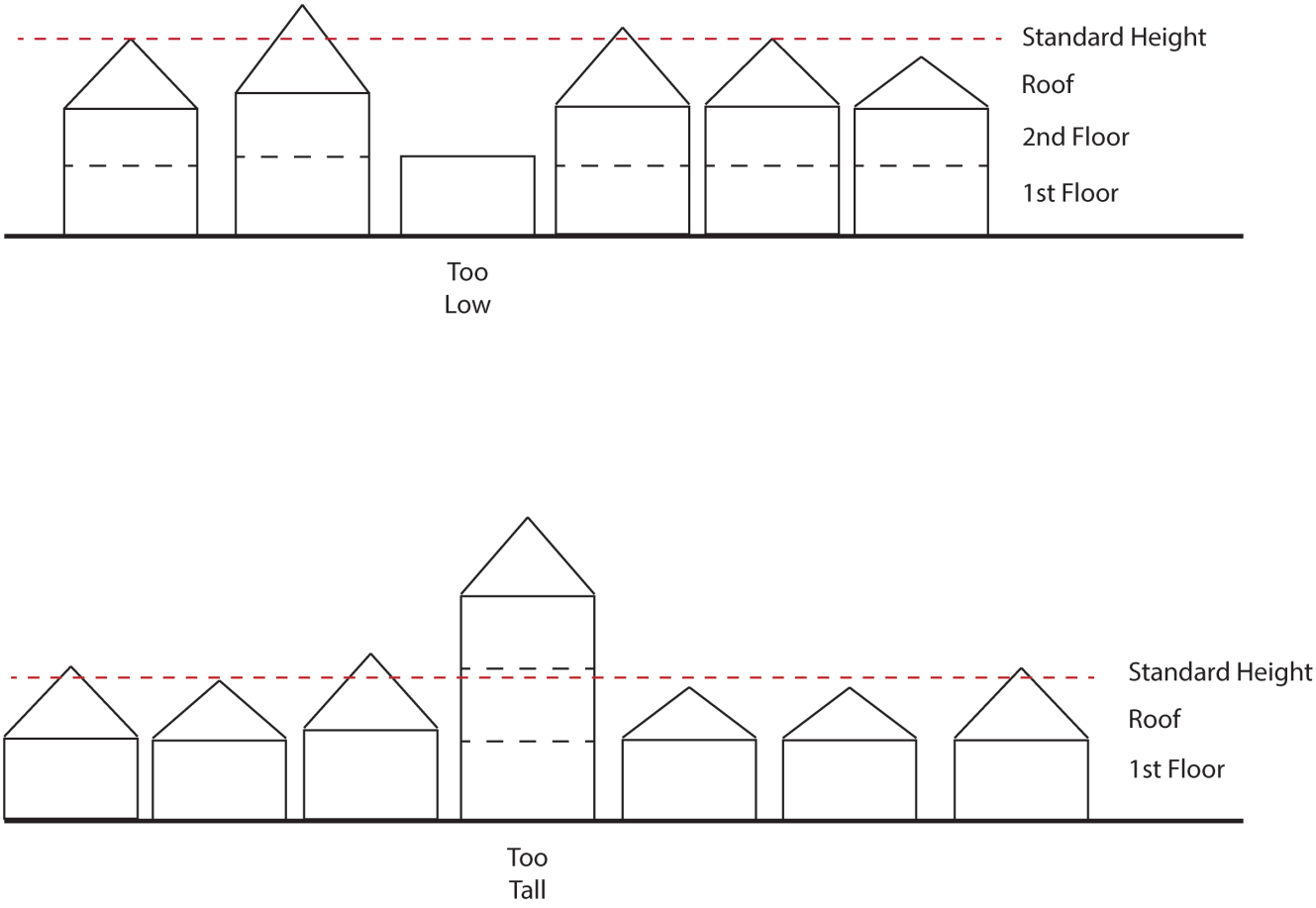
Building Height

The Municipality is a mix of rural and village settings. Most buildings are two stories or less. Buildings taller than two stories are mostly absent from the Municipality. A small number of special taller buildings, however, can provide distinctive, even iconic, views. Buildings, however, can be too tall for their context. They may look out of place next to smaller buildings, or create too much shade on streets, parks or other private yards.

While tall buildings can be inappropriate, some buildings can be too low. Very low buildings may look out of place next to taller buildings. Also, buildings need to be tall enough to define outdoor space. This idea is discussed more in the sections on streetwalls and streetscapes.

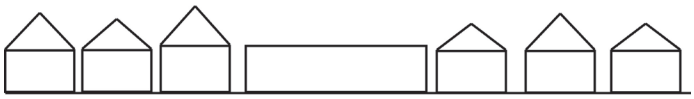
Building Size and Shape

The length and width of buildings is a key component of their size. Just as each area has proper heights, each area has a range of proper building sizes. Older buildings – especially in villages and hamlets – often have the narrow side facing the street, because lots are narrow and long. Similar, narrow building widths repeated along a street produces an interesting and pleasing rhythm.



Above: In general, building heights in villages and rural areas should be similar, but not the same.

Some buildings are made of one large portion. Other buildings are divided into smaller sections. A building might have a wing, or a veranda or a gable that visually breaks the building into different parts. Just as a building can feel too tall, or too wide, a building can feel too bulky if its mass is not divided into small enough parts. The way a building's shape is arranged is technically called its massing.



Too Wide





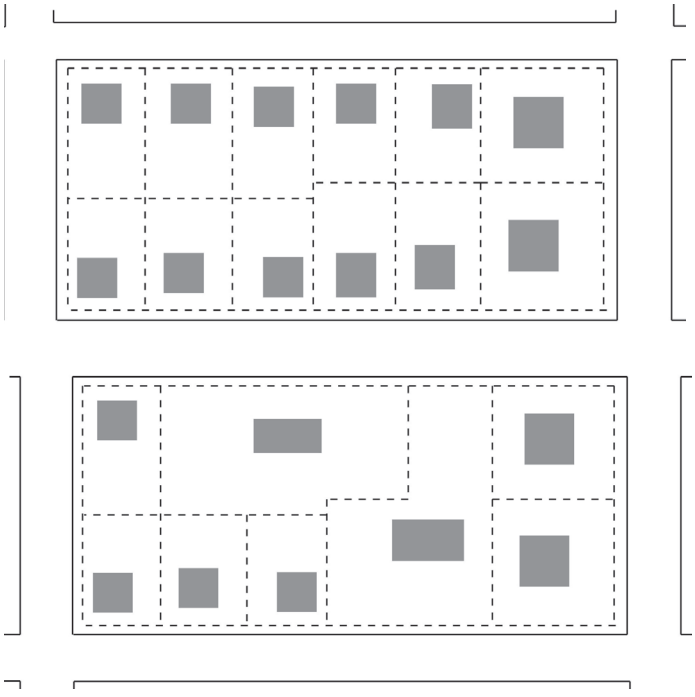
Top: Buildings that are too wide disrupt the rhythm of a street. **Middle:** Simple massing - one section made of a triangle and rectangle. **Bottom:** Complex massing - many sections made of different size rectangles and triangles.

Lot Size and Building Placement

Lot size affects the look and feel of communities. Villages have smaller lots than rural areas, and buildings are often closer to the edge of their lots. Buildings in villages also tend to cover more of their lots. Rural communities have larger lots, and buildings often cover a small part of their lot.

In towns and villages, random lots that are too big or too small for their context stand out. These lots disrupt the visual rhythm. They can look out of place or even unappealing, even if the landscaping and building is otherwise nice. In rural areas, lots for homes and businesses are usually large. In rural communities, a group of homes on typical suburban sized lots may look out of place, as the pattern is so different from the surroundings.

In many traditional communities, private lot sizes often vary, but not too much. Larger lots tended to be the site of larger public buildings.

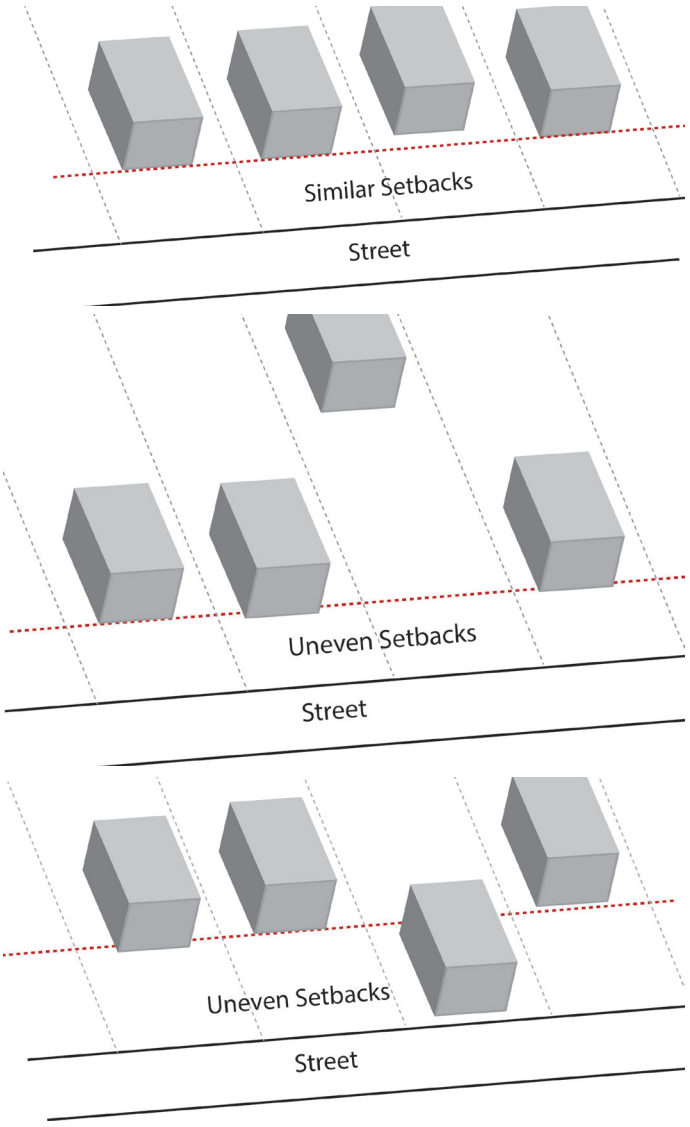


Top: Building lots with some variation, but a general pattern are common in traditional communities. **Bottom:** Large lots can break up the pattern of yards and buildings that makes a place distinct.

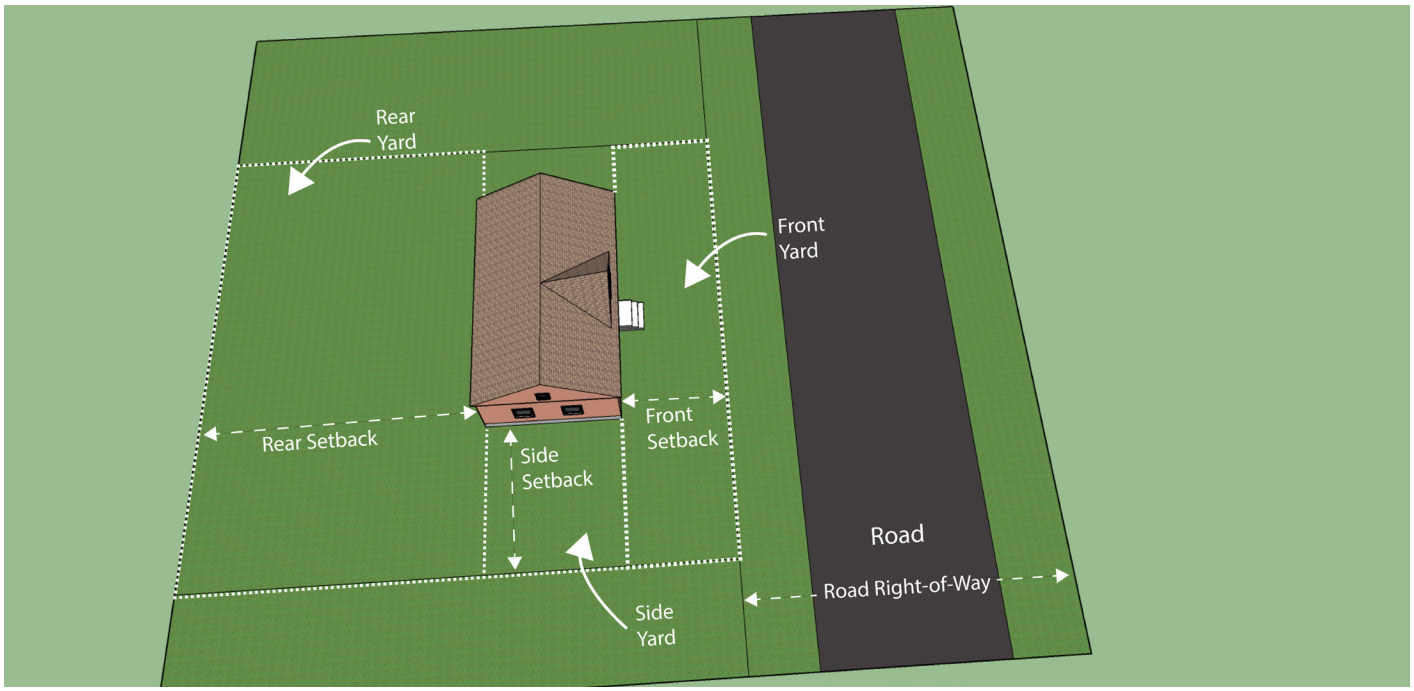
Building Placement - Setbacks

Setbacks refer to how far buildings are from the street or property lines. In rural areas, buildings are often far from roads and other homes. Farmhouses in large fields are common in farming communities. Along the coast, many buildings are close to the ocean, instead of facing the road. Traditionally, homes on the coast needed access to the water for work or transportation. Newer coastal homes usually have water access for recreation or the view. In general, there is a wide variety of setbacks in rural and coastal areas, especially where lots are large.

The front setback is the distance between the front propety line and the front of a building. Side setbacks are the distance between a building's side and the property line, while the rear setback is the distance between the back of a building and the rear property line. In villages and small towns, the front setback is very important, as the front of buildings form the edges of streetscapes.



Right: Similar setbacks define the edge of the street, but setbacks that are too small or too large are usually out of place. **Below:** Setbacks and yards.



Two big changes that have taken place since Land Use By-laws were introduced are standard lot sizes and standard building setbacks. Older buildings built before zoning became common were often placed close to the street. Newer buildings are often in the centre of their lot, creating space for a front lawn, which is the standard suburban style throughout North America.

In older commercial areas, setbacks tended to be minimal. Stores and offices wanted to be close to the people walking on the street. Newer stores are often far from the street behind parking lots.

Streets and Streetscapes

Streetscapes have two major parts: the street and the street edge (the buildings next to the street). When talking about built form, more than just the travel lanes are considered. Everything within the right of way, and sometimes everything from building edge to building edge, can be thought of as the street. Many elements can make up a full street cross-section, including:

- Travel lanes for cars;
- Sidewalks and crosswalks;
- Shoulders/ ditches; or curb/ gutter;
- On-street parking;
- Bike lanes or trails;
- Furniture, like benches, tables, bike racks or canopies;
- Street trees; lights and landscaping.



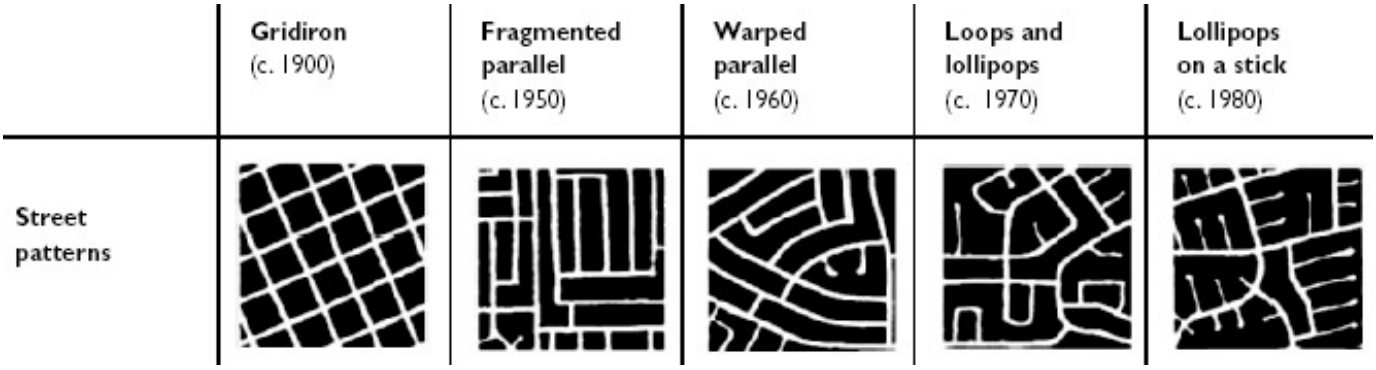
Often, curbs, gutters and sidewalks are only used for city, town and village streets. Rural roads usually have shoulders and ditches.

One of the basic debates in street design is how much space to provide for each user. Village main streets often provide lots of sidewalk space for people walking, sitting and visiting. Other roads may be arterials that have wide lanes for moving cars. Many communities have provided more and more space for moving cars (travel lanes) and storing cars (parking lanes and parking lots). This makes driving easy, but can make streets less safe and less comfortable for people walking or cycling.

Building facades form the vertical edges of streetstacpes. Most streets in the Municipality do



Top: Large parking lots in front of buildings are a standard suburban layout. **Bottom:** Wide streets are common even in quiet residential neighbourhoods. Wide roads encourage high traffic speeds and make crossing the street uncomfortable. **Left:** Buildings on Pleasant Street form a continual street wall.



Above: Over the last century, street layouts have moved away from well connected grids. Modern street layouts have fewer street connections.

not have a complete streetwall, because there are large gaps between buildings. In Chester Village, a strong streetwall is found only on the main streets, Pleasant and Queen, where buildings are close together. On Pleasant Street, buildings are the right height and distance from the sidewalk to create a vertical edge and a pleasant sense of enclosure.

Facades and Ground Floors

The façade is the front of a building, usually the side facing the street. The building facade is the most public part of a building. Its design sets the tone for how the building looks, and what impression it makes from the street. The ground floor design of a building determines where people can enter a building, and whether the building helps make the street interesting and comfortable. Buildings with many windows and doors at ground level are said to create an active ground floor. People can enter the building, see what's happening inside, and are comfortable spending time outside near these buildings. Buildings with very few - or no - windows and doors suggest that people are not welcome. Large walls without windows or entrances have been termed blank walls.

In traditional settlements, most buildings have active ground floors. Older buildings often have inviting facades with windows, doors and porches. These elements make people feel welcome and encourage informal social contact. Modern architecture moved away from the traditional active ground floor in the 20th century. Since the 1950s, some buildings have been built with large blank walls, which create spaces that repel people. Rules that govern built form usually restrict blank walls.

Street Patterns

Street layouts impact how easy it is to walk within a community. Some street patterns provide many connections between streets. Other street patterns do not provide good connections. Where connections are poor, there are few direct routes and walking distances increase. Long distances and detours discourage people from walking.

Traditional street patterns, like the Village of Chester's grid, provide many connections and are easy to navigate. Newer street patterns often have loops and cul-de-sacs. These street patterns first appeared in the 20th century, and have become very common since the 1950s.

The main reason for designing looping street patterns with cul-de-sacs is to reduce through traffic. Fewer road connections also reduce the length of road per lot. Some homeowners prefer to live on cul-de-sacs. Cul-de-sacs provide some privacy and there is no through traffic. The problem of poor connections and long walking distance is, however, a downside. Modern design is trying to move back to street patterns with many connections and direct routes for walkers. This can be achieved by creating off-street paths and more road connections.

Built Form Types

There are a handful of main built form patterns in the Municipality. Some are rural patterns. Others are traditional village patterns found along the South Shore of Nova Scotia. There is variety within these patterns, but each pattern has typical building types, lot sizes and streetscapes. In some jurisdictions, entire streets or neighbourhoods are recognized and protected as important examples of historical settlement patterns. New patterns are based on modern zoning and engineering standards. These patterns tend to be more uniform, and can be found throughout Canada and North America. Newer styles are scattered through older parts of the Chester Village, but the traditional patterns are still dominant.

Village Neighbourhoods

The village neighbourhood pattern is mostly 1½ to 2½ storey homes with steep roofs. Many buildings are narrow, and the narrow side of the building often faces the street. Three large churches and a number of estate style homes are also part of this pattern.

Lot sizes and setbacks vary, but buildings close to the road are found on most streets. Front façades often have a path from the road to a porch, veranda or covered entrance. Driveways or parking in the front yard is rare; most driveways are placed to the side of homes.

The key element of the streetscapes are large trees growing at the edge of the street. The tree canopy provides shade and enclosure. The large tree trunks also define the vertical edge of the street. Despite many different setbacks, the tree trunks provide a unifying vertical edge that keeps the pattern coherent.

There are several traditional architectural styles. Dormers, gables and porches are common elements of several of these styles. Many houses are painted light, bright colours. Architecture is an important part of the neighbourhood character, but the street trees, the narrow buildings and the lot setbacks are also important.





Top: Typical village streetscape, showing historic homes, narrow streets and trees. **Bottom:** The library and museum are both typical historic structures in the centre of the village.

Village Main Streets

The main streets are Pleasant and the lower section of Queen. The defining qualities of these streets are:

- commercial buildings with ground floor storefronts
- zero or limited setback from the sidewalk
- little space between buildings
- sidewalks, and a lack of street trees
- on-street parking or side-yard parking

The pattern in Chester is a good example of intact small town main streets. Like many main streets, there is a mix of stores, offices and restaurants. There are also some upper floor apartments and houses in the mix.

The main streets are one of the few areas in the Municipality with sidewalks. Building entrances and windows face the sidewalk. Entrances open right onto the sidewalk. On-street parking and some small lots to the side of buildings are present, but the amount of space used for parking is small.



Pleasant and Queen Streets are excellent examples of intact main streets built for walkers. Buildings are close to each other and the sidewalk, and ground floors are interesting storefronts and restaurants. The buildings are mostly heritage buildings with local architectural styles and building materials.







Estate Residential

Most of the estate residential pattern is in Chester Village, near the Back Harbour or on the Peninsula. Large homes sit on very large lots. These homes are usually far from the road and surrounded by large lawns, flower beds and tree stands. Unlike other village neighbourhoods, the long side of these homes often face the street. Decorative facades and large, formal grounds make many of these houses and streets appear very grand.

Highway Commercial

The general pattern along Highway 3 has many features found in newer commercial areas across Canada. This pattern is often called 'strip commercial' or 'ribbon development' because it is found in long stretches along major roads. The definitive feature of this type of development is the amount of space used for parking. While appropriate in some areas, this pattern in less desireable in villages and hamlets.

Other common features of the highway commercial pattern are:

- Long, low buildings
- Many car oriented businesses, like gas stations, repair shops and drive-thrus
- Buildings set behind parking lots or behind driveways
- Corporate or franchise architectural styles, instead of local architectural styles
- Some tall signs and many small signs









Top: Large homes in the estate residential area, seen from the Harbour. **Bottom/ Middle:** Typical highway commercial buildings, with large signs and large parking lots. **Left:** Highway 3, showing the wide street, lack of crosswalks and the corporate brands and architecture commonly seen across Canada.

Subdivisions

Subdivisions are residential developments created by selling lots that once formed part of a larger property. Before World War II, new lots were often created on existing or extended streets. Subdivisions usually maintained or continued older street patterns. Since the 1950s and 1960s, new subdivisions often have new streets that are curvy and poorly connected. Older developments were closer to existing villages and settlements, but many subdivisions are often built all across the municipality. This process is sometimes called leapfrog growth, where new development jumps over vacant lead and spreads outward.

Unserviced subdivisions in the rural areas need larger lots for septic fields. Some subdivisions in the municipality are connected to the central sewer system. Other subdivisions have small central septic systems. On Millenium Drive, houses are attached and lots are small, but most subdivisions in the municipality have detached houses. Mill Cove Park, under construction, will have a mix of housing types and hundreds of units.

Subdivisions have common patterns:

- Large lots and privacy
- Limited housing types/ styles
- Mostly residential
- Disconnected street pattern
- Garages and driveways, sometimes placed in the front yard









Above: Single unit houses on large lots are the dominant building type in rural subdivisions. **Left:** Millenium Drive is a unique example of attached buildings in the Municipality. The large lawns, buildings facing parking lots and large parking areas are a suburban built form.

Institutional Campus

Important buildings like schools, post offices and churches used to be placed in the centre of villages and communities. Institutions are now often built on separate campuses with other institutions. Good examples include the middle and elementary schools in Chester Village, which form their own campus with separate lawns, fields, driveways and parking areas. The Shoreham Village Seniors housing is another example. If poorly designed or too large, these campuses may disconnect institutions from the rest of the community.









Top: The RCMP building at Exit 8 is a typical modern institutional building. **Above:** An aerial view of two large campuses on the edge of Chester, the two elementary schools (orange) and the retirement village (light blue). **Top left:** Chester Middle School. **Bottom left:** Shoreham Village retirement home.

Rural Hamlet

Rural hamlets are small communities like New Ross, Chester Basin and Hubbards. They are often older communities that grew up near a crossroad. A cluster of housing is found near the centre of hamlets. Although mostly residential, small local businesses in the hamlets provide commerical services like pharmacies and banks to rural residents across the Municipality.







Top: New Ross Post Office and retirement home. **Middle:** Chester Basin Post Office and Credit Union. **Bottom:** Trellis Cafe in Hubbards. (Jim Barkhouse) **Right:** Photo courtesy Jim Barkhouse, Chester.

Cultural Landscapes

Cultural landscapes are environments that have been shaped by human settlement and use. There are buildings and structures in these landscapes, but unlike in villages or other communities, the buildings are not the major feature. Instead the character of a place is a mix of buildings, land use (especially resource or recreation uses) and landscape.

Rural Resource

Landscapes with resource activity - especially forestry and agriculture - are a large portion of the Municipality. Farms, logging operations and pits and quarries are supported by industry like construction firms, trucking and heavy equipment. The landscape is varied, but features few homes and a broad mix of rural industrial uses and resource extraction. The rural resource landscape is sparsely settled, with large lots, often where people work and run businesses to make their living.





Waterfront

Waterfront areas are found across the Municipality. Common elements of the waterfront are: public and private docks and wharfs; stone or concrete walls protecting lots and buildings; and boat sheds, trap houses and other out-buildings. There are several types of waterfront areas, including estate residential, light industrial working waterfronts, recreational uses and seasonal homes.



Top: Back Harbour, Chester Village (Jim Barkhouse) **Middle:** Waterfront residential property with a private dock. **Bottom:** Fishing wharf near Mill Cove.

Density

Density is a measure of how many people or how many housing units are on a piece of land, or in a community or neighbourhood. Low density areas have few people living on large amounts of land, while high density areas have many people living on small amounts of land. Rural areas have very low densities and villages have low or moderate densities. To make comparisons easier, we often measure density as the number of housing units per acre or per hectare. Four factors influence density:

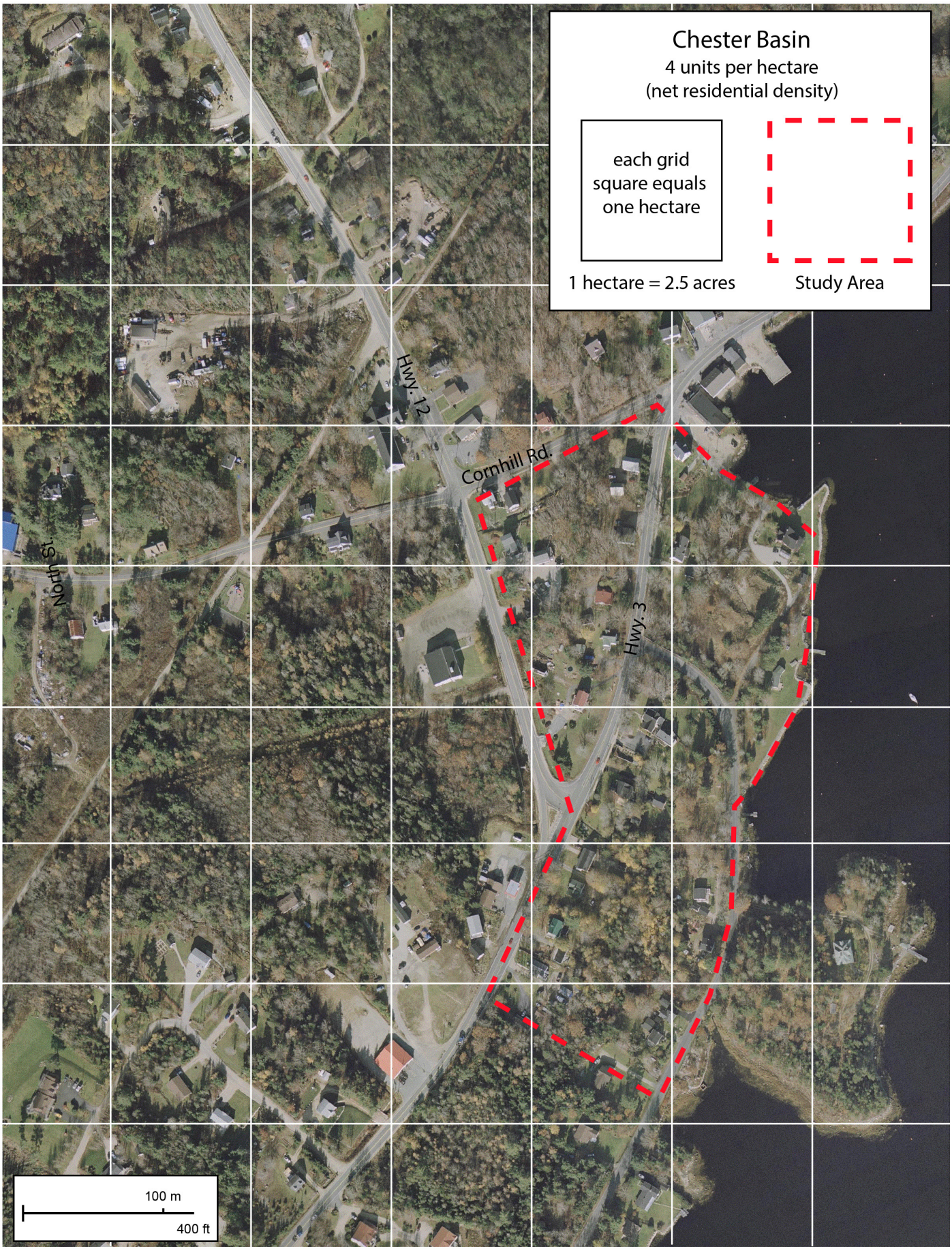
- Lot sizes and setbacks;
- How much of a lot is built on (lot coverage);
- Common buildings types; and
- Building heights.

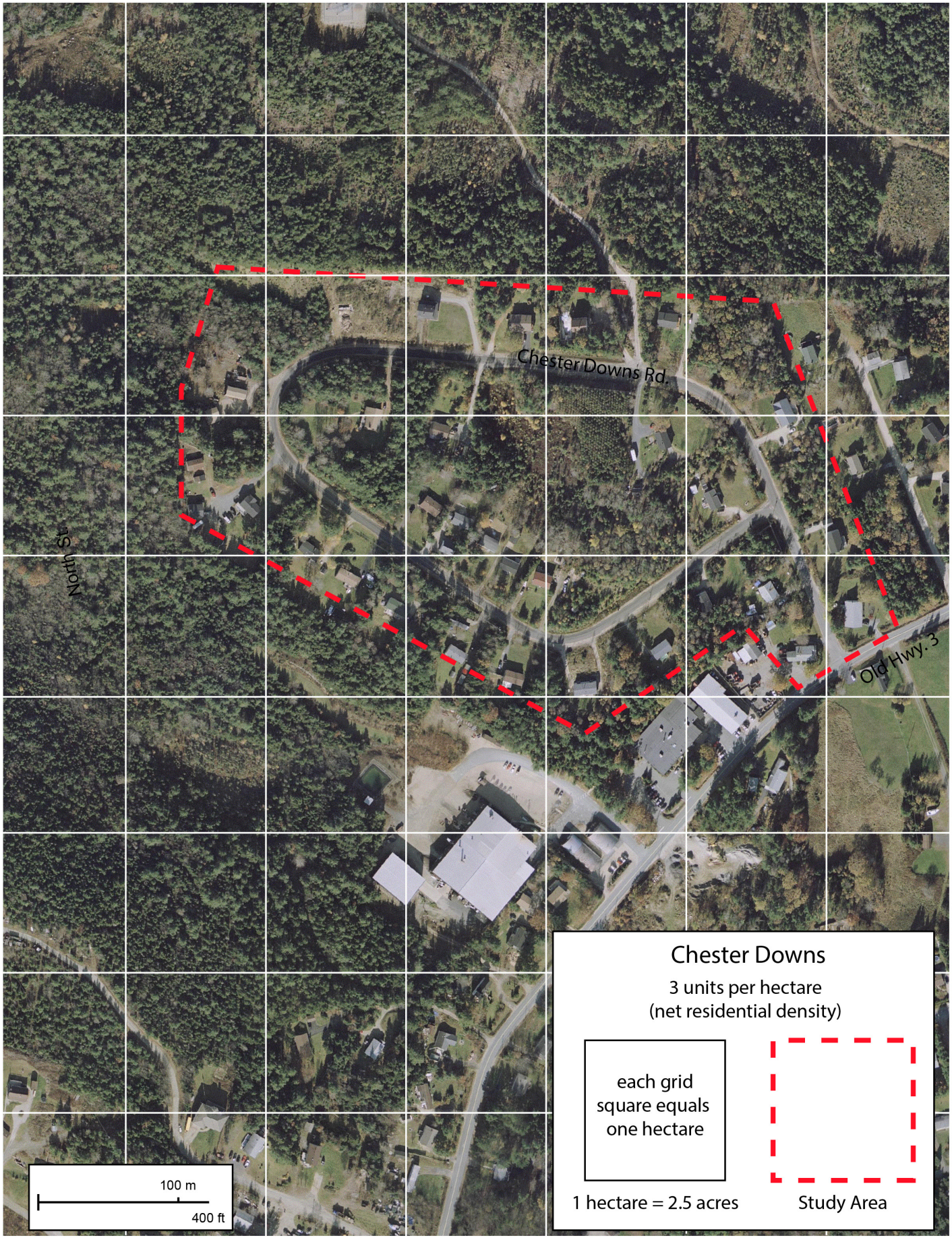
When lots and setbacks are large, densities are low; when lots and setbacks are small densities are higher. Covering more of a lot with buildings raises density. Building types are also a factor. Detached houses have lower densities than comparable attached buildings like duplexes or townhouses. Finally, if all else is equal, taller buildings are denser than shorter buildings. In villages and rural areas, height is often not a critical factor, as almost all buildings are one or two storeys.

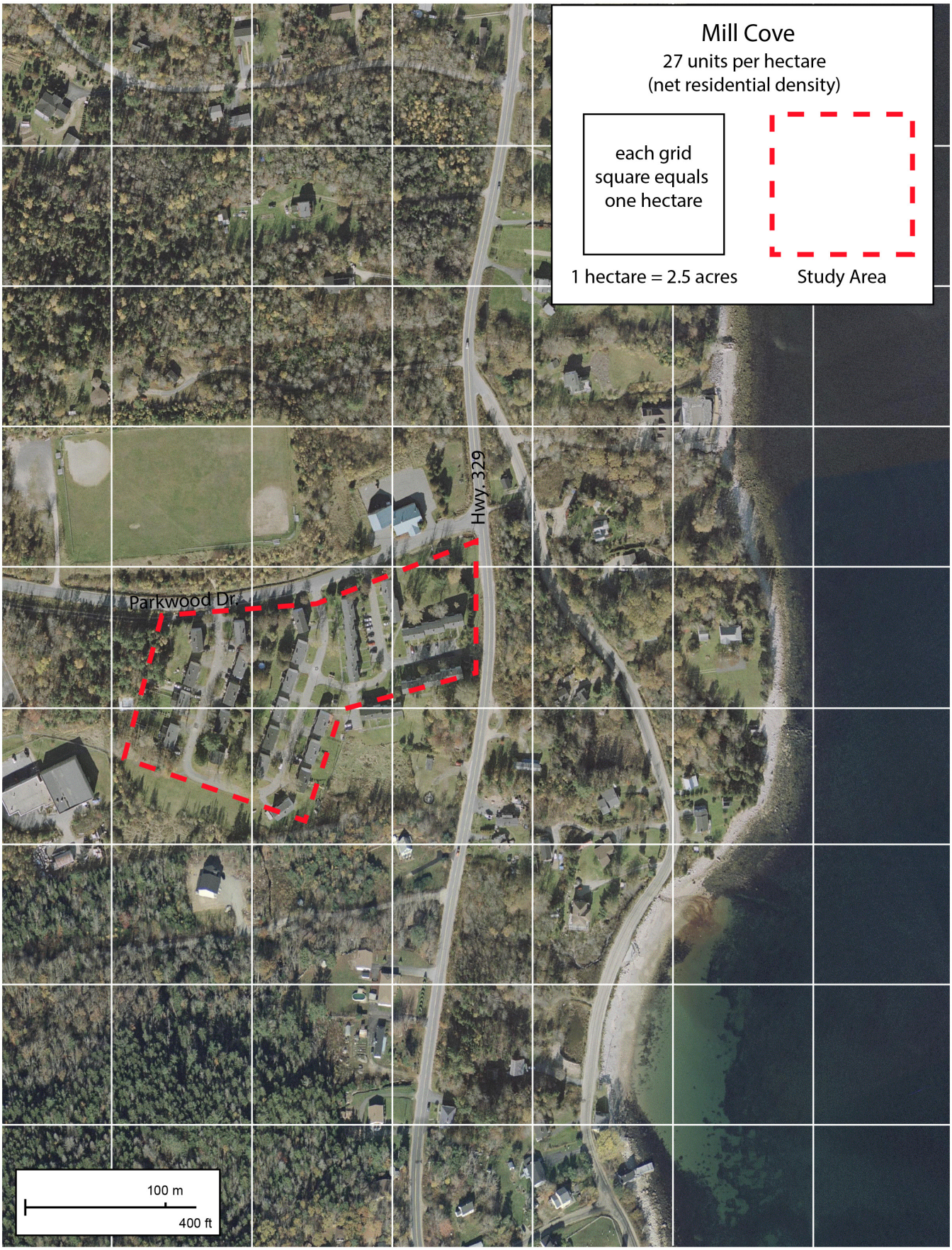
The Municipality has a range of densities, from very low density rural areas to medium density parts of Chester Village. While density is quantifiable, descriptors like 'low' or 'high' are contextual. The densest areas of Chester Village would not be very dense in an urban context. Each community has its own appropriate level of development and density.

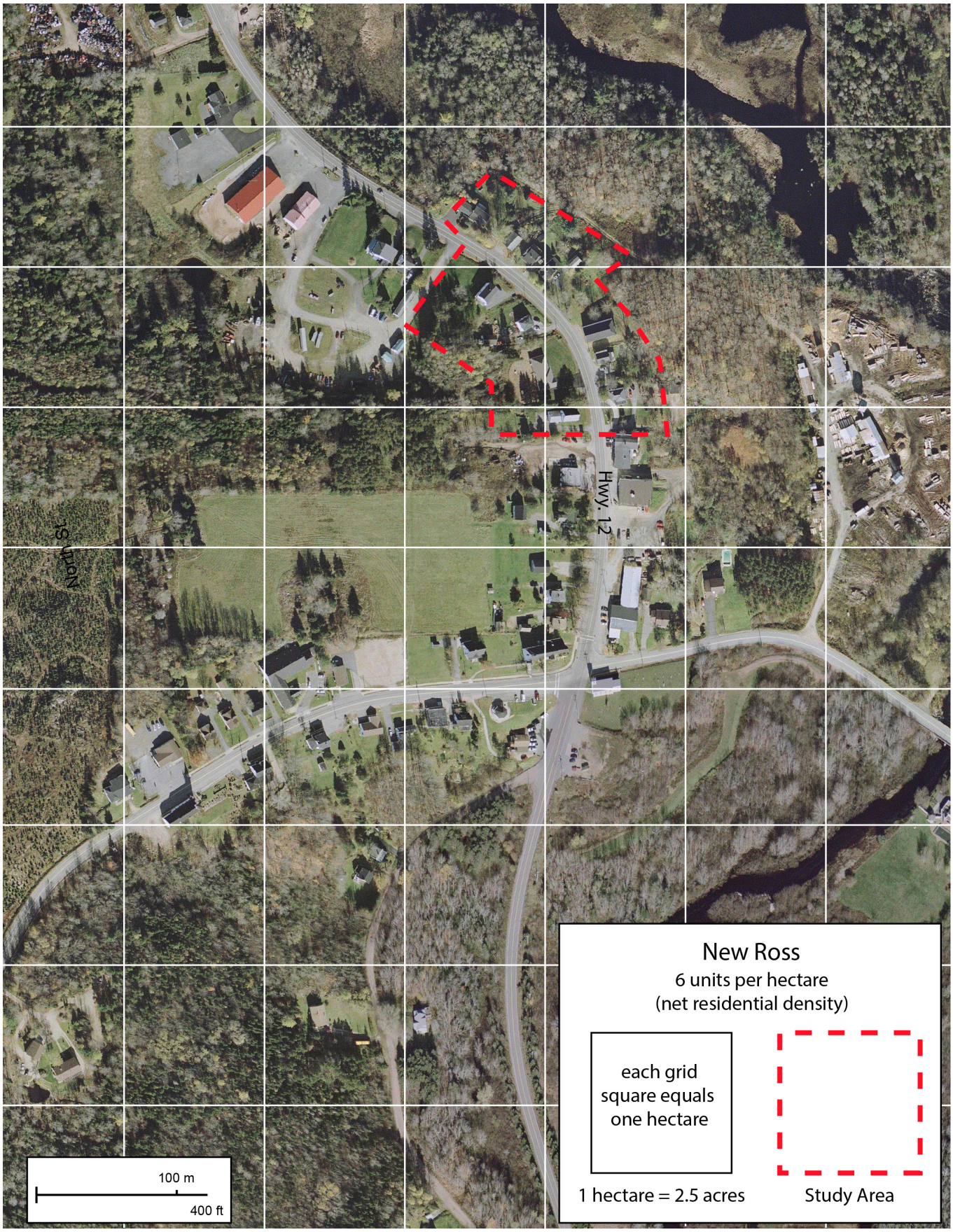
The following pages show aerial photos of different communities and their net densities. The density is given as net housing units per hectare: roads, parks and commercial land is not counted in the density calculations.

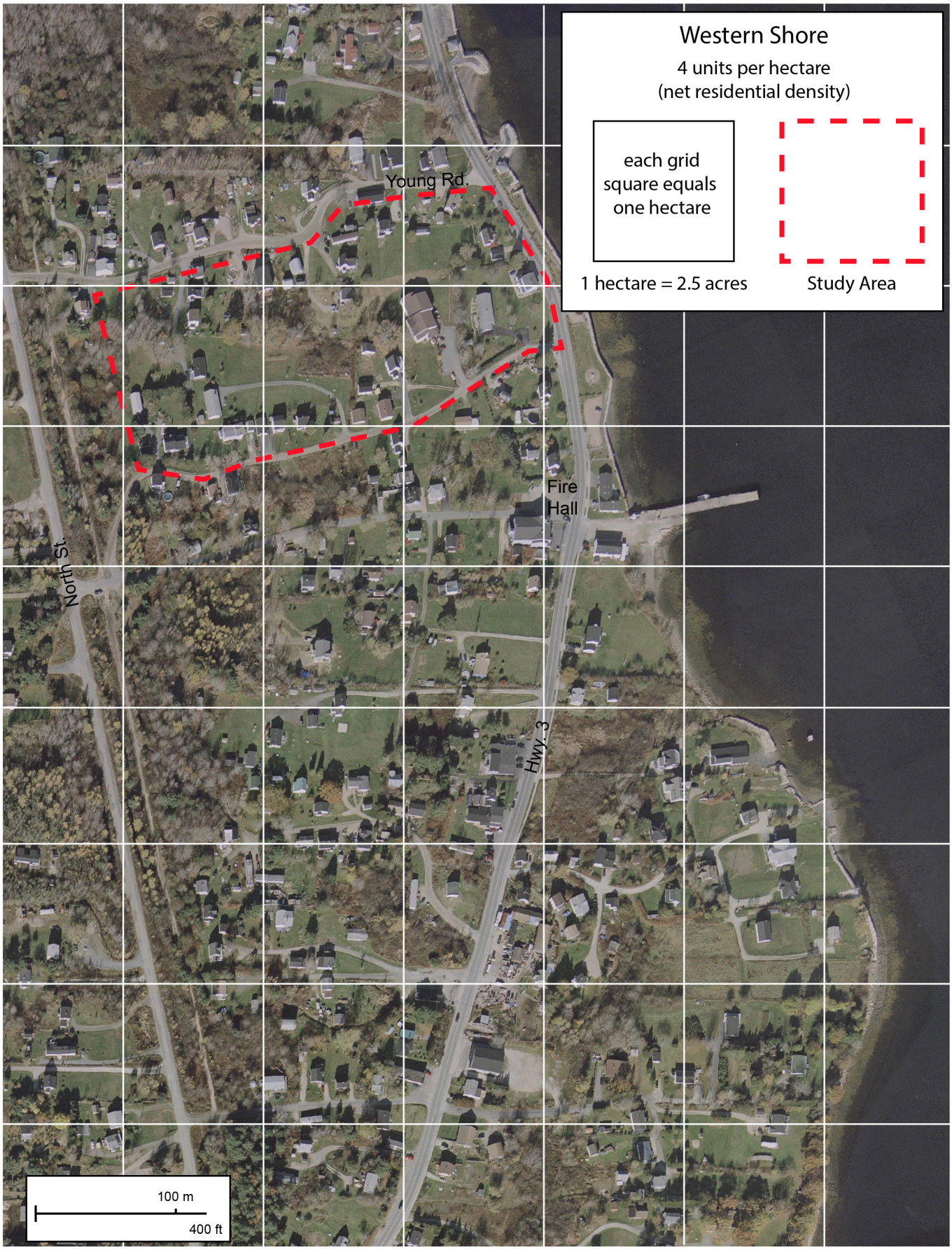

Bayswater
3 units per hectare
(net residential density)
each grid square equals one hectare
1 hectare = 2.5 acres
Study Area
North St.
Old School Rd.
Hwy. 329
100 m
400 ft


Chester Basin
4 units per hectare
(net residential density)
each grid square equals one hectare
1 hectare = 2.5 acres
Study Area
Hwy. 12
Cornhill Rd.
North St.
Hwy. 3
100 m
400 ft


Chester Downs Rd.
North St
Old Hwy. 3
100 m
400 ft
Chester Downs
3 units per hectare
(net residential density)
each grid square equals one hectare
1 hectare = 2.5 acres
Study Area


Mill Cove
27 units per hectare
(net residential density)
each grid square equals one hectare
1 hectare = 2.5 acres
Study Area
Hwy. 329
Parkwood Dr.
100 m
400 ft


Hwy. 12
North
100 m
400 ft
New Ross
6 units per hectare
(net residential density)
each grid square equals one hectare
1 hectare = 2.5 acres
Study Area


Western Shore
4 units per hectare
(net residential density)
each grid square equals one hectare
1 hectare = 2.5 acres
Study Area
Young Rd.
Fire Hall
North St.
Hwy. 3
100 m
400 ft


Chester Village
Highway 3
Victoria St.
Valley Rd.
King St.
Regent St.
Pleasant St.
200 m
900 ft
under 3 units/ hectare
3-6 units/ hectare
7-12 units/ hectare
13-20 units/ hectare
over 20 units/ hectare

Conclusions

Each community in the Municipality has certain characteristics that define it. Some defining features are the natural setting. Other defining features are the people, groups and institutions that call each community home.

One of the most important features to discuss during the Plan Review is the built form and density that is appropriate for each community. Plans and zoning by-laws are often about regulating what gets built and how things get built. Knowing the building styles and patterns common to each community helps to produce better guidelines and regulations.

Every community has its own particular built form, but there are broad patterns that exist in different communities throughout the Municipality. These patterns are the built form types - Highway Commerical, Subdivisions, Estate Residential, etc. - discussed in this report.

The built form types and cultural landscapes are descriptions of what exists right now in the Municipality. Staff feels that each community or neighbourhood in the Municipality can be described as one of these types. Other parts of the Municipality that are completly unsettled are wilderness areas and will be considered in a separate report on the natural environment.

This report is a starting point for understanding what characteristics make each community feel the way it does. Discussions with the public will be needed to understand what the community values, and what built form aspects to consider in new planning documents.