

In growing areas, a tale of too-similar cities

By [Sonia Krishnan](#)

Seattle Times Eastside bureau

As far as downtowns go, Newcastle's wouldn't stand out in a crowd.

There's a Blockbuster on one side, a QFC on the other and more chain franchises nearby.

But just east of the city's strip-mall nucleus, inside a nondescript two-story building, change is brewing.

Twelve years after Newcastle incorporated, officials at City Hall are grappling with how to give their beloved town what it needs most: an identity.

"It's almost a premature, midlife-crisis question of 'Who am I?'" said City Manager John Starbard.

Across Western Washington, more than a dozen cities that incorporated during the 1990s are facing a similar transition. With their startup pains mostly behind them, the new cities find themselves eager to shed their image as Anywhere, USA, with nothing but a Safeway and a Starbucks to anchor their cores.

In King County, cities from Kenmore to Federal Way are ramping up efforts to establish distinct downtowns — and build a sense of place.

"If you just create a bedroom city where people take off their hat and sleep, then there's no community," said Kenmore Mayor Randy Eastwood.

What's happening in Washington echoes a nationwide trend, city planners say. More cities, young and old, are rejecting homogenous retail terrain in favor of crafting more interesting identities. It's a strategy aimed to keep residents, draw new ones and, for many, attract visitors to boost the local economy.

DEAN RUTZ / THE SEATTLE TIMES



DEAN RUTZ / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Which city is which?

City A? Can you tell Burien from Kenmore from Sammamish from Newcastle in these photos? [Answers](#) near end of story.



DEAN RUTZ / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Which city is which?

City B? Can you tell Burien from Kenmore from Sammamish from Newcastle in these photos? [Answers](#) near end of story.



DEAN RUTZ / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Which city is which?

City C? Can you tell Burien from Kenmore from Sammamish from Newcastle in these photos? [Answers](#) near end of story.



DEAN RUTZ / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Which city is which?

City D? Can you tell Burien from Kenmore from Sammamish from Newcastle in these photos? [Answers](#) near end of story.

Twelve years after Newcastle incorporated, officials at City Hall are grappling with how to give their beloved "It's a small snowball that's gaining momentum," said Al Zelinka, a consultant for the American Planning Association, who co-authored a guide for cities on creating community spaces. "For a long time, cities yearned for the Wal-Marts and the McDonald's — all the quote-unquote modern-day conveniences. Now that we have them and see what they mean to our community landscapes, we're realizing we need something different. We want our authenticity to show itself."

The pendulum shift reflects how America's obsession with growth has left countless communities devoid of character, say experts who study municipal trends.

"Cities want to transform themselves from bland suburbs into destination places that have some meaning," said Fritz Wagner, professor of urban design and planning at the University of Washington and managing director of the Northwest Center for Livable Communities.

That doesn't mean every city wants to follow the example of Leavenworth, which transformed itself from a Depression-era railroad and lumber town to a Bavarian-themed tourist attraction. Nor does every city have the waterfront assets of Edmonds and Kirkland, often cited as model cities that have crafted strong community identities.

But every city has something different to offer, planners say. It's just a matter of finding it.

A little soul-searching

To help with that soul-searching, city leaders are holding public forums, hiring outside consultants and conducting community surveys. They're setting up home-grown festivals and events, taking cues from such cities as Issaquah, which draws 150,000 visitors each fall to its hugely popular Salmon Days. The two-day festival builds on the city's signature salmon hatchery and generates a \$7.5 million economic impact for the city, according to the Issaquah Chamber of Commerce.

Other cities look to their local history, geographic features or dominant industries to create a unique image — from Redmond's high-tech focus to Snoqualmie's majestic falls and historic railroad depot. For some, even a small touch can reap big rewards. Kirkland's collection of whimsical public art, for example, has helped build its reputation as an offbeat, artsy community.

Pedestrian-friendly outdoor spaces and eye-catching civic buildings — such as public libraries, city halls and fire stations — are also key to cementing a communal atmosphere, said Mark Hinshaw, who helps cities design their core developments as director of urban design for Seattle-based LMN Architects.

When people feel connected to others, that's when a community evolves, he said.



In Sammamish, city leaders recently hosted a series of public meetings to find out how residents want to see a 540-acre proposed downtown core develop. Options ranged from a low-density "village" to midrise, multifamily housing with office space.

"Our citizens don't want the big-box retail," said Mayor Michele Petitti. "They take away the identity from the city."

In Snoqualmie, city officials hired a consulting firm that found that while 2.2 million people visit the city annually to see Snoqualmie Falls, 99 percent spend no time or money in the city because they "don't realize there is a downtown." Among the recommendations: create a downtown that functions as a "hub of activity," with gathering places, specialty shops, wider sidewalks and outdoor seating.

"Pretty much everyone's got rivers and mountains in Washington," said Snoqualmie Mayor Matt Larson. "The question is, 'How do you set yourself apart?'"

Future visions

In Newcastle, city officials envision a civic center with upscale restaurants, interactive entertainment, a specialty bakery, floral and garden shop, a bookstore and a wine shop and tasting room. They also want to capitalize on Newcastle's unique coal-mining history.

"We're never going to be able to compete with Redmond for office space," Starbard said. "We can't provide the regional attractions of Seattle. But we can have something that is a little more intimate and authentic."

Kenmore's proposed plan for shaping up its 10 city-owned acres downtown calls for plazas and a signature public space along with mixed-use retail and housing. City leaders are also pondering how to show off Kenmore's natural beauty.

"We've got the greatest undeveloped assets, like the Sammamish River. We're situated at the top of Lake Washington," Eastwood said. "These are things that are yelling out to be beautified."

Even older, rural Enumclaw announced plans last month to build a new equestrian center to cast itself as the "horse capital of the Northwest."

Some South King County cities are using economic incentives to help shape a new image.

Burien, for instance, has embarked on a \$138 million makeover to turn its undistinguished four-block downtown into a community hub. Residential-property owners in Town Square, expected to be completed by 2009, won't have to pay taxes for 10 years. The center will have more than 300 condominiums and apartments, retail shops, restaurants, a new City Hall/library and a public plaza and park.

Federal Way is also offering a decade-long property-tax exemption to potential downtown developers, and has set up a \$5 million fund to encourage public/private partnerships that foster the city's vision of a more pedestrian-friendly downtown, said Patrick Doherty, the city's director of economic development.

Further north, Woodinville, after years of being branded as rural countryside, is turning its small-town image into an upscale winery mecca.

And Renton, long thought of as a blue-collar town, is starting construction this year on the first phase of The Landing, a stylish urban village with 600,000 square feet of retail and 900 apartments or condos on former Boeing land.

Getting it just right

Answers to unnamed cities

A: Newcastle, incorporated in 1994, has a population of 9,175.

B: Kenmore, incorporated in 1998, has a population of 19,680.

C: Burien, incorporated in 1993, has a population of 31,080.

D: Sammamish, incorporated in 1999, has a population of 39,730.

But don't expect the new identities to emerge overnight, Hinshaw cautioned.

"It takes time to mature and get a real, genuine identity," he said. "It's pretty difficult to do something in two to three years."

The wait is beginning to pay off for Mill Creek in Snohomish County. The former bedroom community recently transformed its strip-mall downtown into a bustling regional destination, with high-end stores and crowded restaurants.

In Sammamish, some residents say they are already bolstered by the progress they have seen.

"There have been so many people who've moved up here so recently that there's no city spirit," said David Short, who has lived on the Sammamish Plateau since 1971, long before the city incorporated in 1999. "Maybe with a town center and the [City Hall] going in, maybe people will rally around the center more. I think it's one of the steps necessary in the whole process."

Meanwhile, in Newcastle, Starbard is patient. He and other city leaders say they are willing to take the process step by step to get it just right.

"All too often people look out of a window in a city and say, 'Something got away,' " Starbard said. "Right now, we still have the opportunity to create something that is a reflection of this community. In 20 years, I want people to look out of the window and say, 'They did it right.' "

Sonia Krishnan: 206-515-5546 or skrishnan@seattletimes.com