

## CHAPTER 9:

# COMMUNITY STRUCTURE



*Maintain and enhance  
Ridgefield's overall structure*

### OVERVIEW

Community structure refers to the physical organization of Ridgefield. Structure influences how residents and visitors perceive and understand the community. Physical organization enhances community character and quality of life and can help guide land use regulations and decisions.

People identify most strongly with areas in a community that have a “sense of place,” such as “nodes.” Nodes are distinct areas with notable character; often these are traditional New England downtowns and villages, such as Ridgefield Center. Having attractive, distinctive gateways into a community can also contribute to structure – gateways convey a sense of arrival and give a glimpse of the character of the community.

Land use regulations can reinforce community structure and enhance community character, as they have in Ridgefield. One only needs to look at communities with no discernible structure to realize that community character has been adversely affected. For these reasons, retaining and enhancing Ridgefield's community structure is an important component of this Plan.

## RIDGEFIELD'S STRUCTURE

Ridgefield's community structure (depicted on the Community Structure Plan) can be traced back to the Town's early years when settlements concentrated in what is today Ridgefield Center. Topography reinforced Ridgefield's structure by limiting development in outlying areas to lower densities.

This pattern of a strong village center surrounded by lower intensity areas is still apparent. Ridgefield Center remains as the major community focal point. Residents have expressed a desire to enhance Branchville and re-create a secondary focal point there. Both of these higher intensity village areas are surrounded by open space or low intensity areas, with some exceptions.

Commercial development in the Copps Hill area along Route 35 essentially is an extension of the downtown business area but it lacks "village" character and could be improved and enhanced.

Key gateways are also identified on the Community Structure Plan. Gateways could be enhanced to better reflect Ridgefield's character.

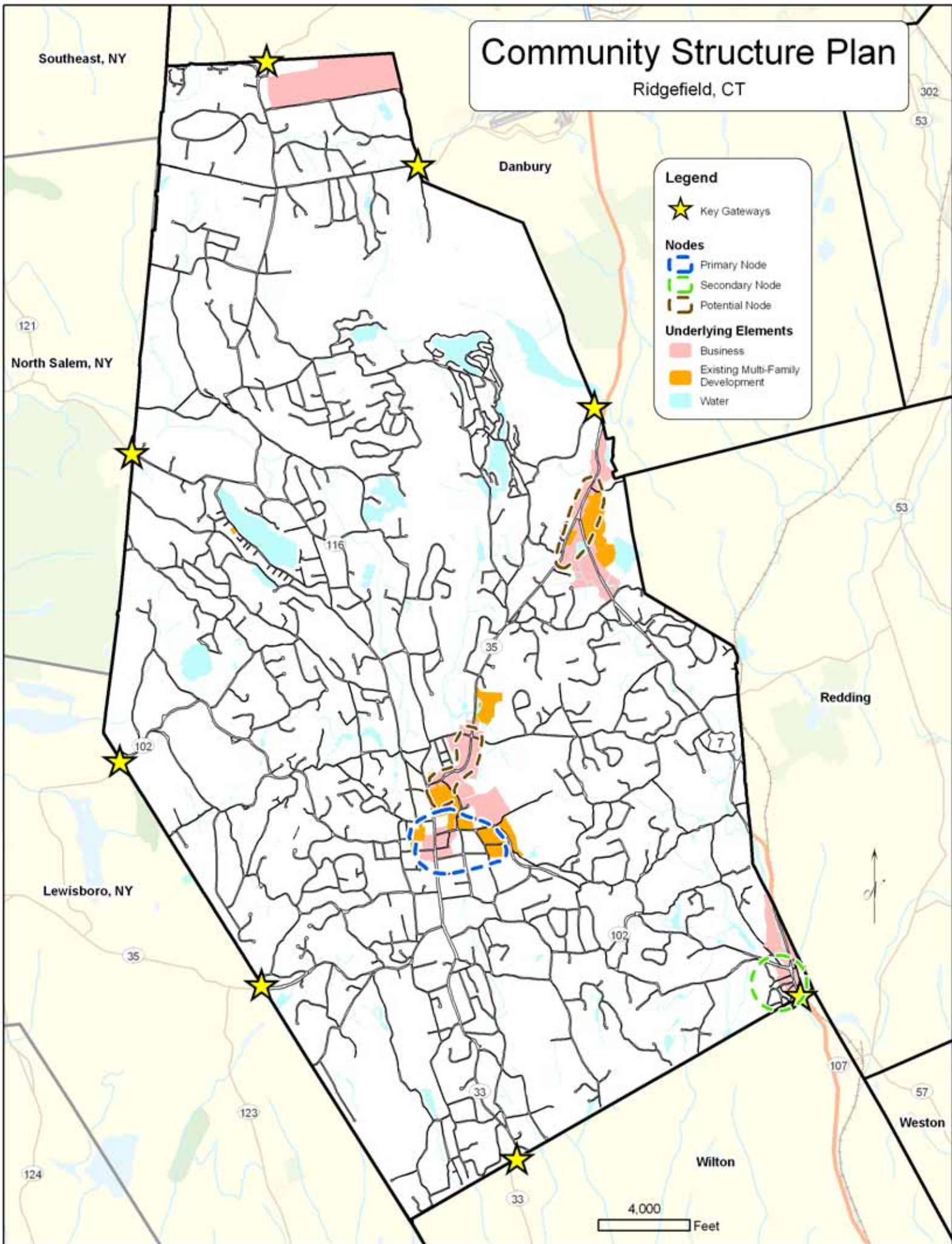
These concepts are discussed in more detail on the following pages.



Photo 20: Ridgefield's historic structure continues today (Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of CT).

# Community Structure Plan

Ridgefield, CT





## Land Uses in Ridgefield Center

According to the 2009 *Ridgefield Center Study*, land uses include:

- Retail, banking, services – 233,737 square feet (sf) (51%)
- Offices – 190,815 sf (42%)
- Restaurants – 31,744 sf (7%)
- Apartments – 23 dwelling units

## RIDGEFIELD CENTER

Ridgefield Center is the business, civic, institutional, and cultural center of the Town. This role should be maintained and enhanced. Ridgefield Center also contains and is surrounded by diverse housing types which add to the activity level of the Center.

Ridgefield Center does face challenges. In Ridgefield, “all roads lead to the Center,” creating traffic congestion due to traffic volumes, signalized intersections, pedestrian activity, on-street parking, and curb cuts. Parking, although available throughout the Center, is often perceived to be an issue. Many of these issues are addressed in the 2009 *Ridgefield Center Study* and the study’s recommendations are incorporated into this Plan (see box for overview of those recommendations).

### 2009 RIDGEFIELD CENTER STUDY

The *Ridgefield Center Study* examined the Central Business District in downtown Ridgefield. The study focused on parking, directional signage for public services and amenities, and traffic and pedestrian circulation. It assessed current conditions and provided recommendations for improvements.

Key recommendations include:

- Converting some vehicular alleyways into pedestrian alleyways.
- Improving vehicular connections between parking lots.
- Reconfiguring, and in some cases expanding, parking lots.
- Installing informational kiosks and wayfinding signs.
- Creating a pocket park.
- Consider turning a portion of Bailey Avenue into a two-way road, with sidewalk and streetscape improvements.
- Consider creating a business improvement district.

The study also recommended a management structure for implementing the improvements. For detailed recommendations, please see the study.

There are concerns that a proliferation of office-type uses on the first floor of buildings could impact the character and overall function of the village as a mixed use activity center. The Town has adopted measures to minimize this potential. For example, zoning regulations require a special permit for first floor office uses. The Town should continue to discourage an abundance of office uses on the street level (in favor of retail, restaurants and personal services), while maintaining flexibility in order to minimize vacant space.

The appearance of downtown – architecture and streetscapes – is an important contributor to Ridgefield’s character. The Commission designated Ridgefield Center as a Village District in 2007, ensuring that when development, redevelopment, or exterior building alterations occur, the Center’s character will be preserved and enhanced.

Lastly, many residents frequent Ridgefield Center, but not all residents are able to physically access businesses, particularly those residents in wheelchairs. It is recognized that it is not always easy to improve the accessibility of older buildings, but the Town should encourage business owners to make improvements where possible. The Town should also improve parking areas and sidewalks to increase accessibility.

## BRANCHVILLE

Branchville is a unique area characterized by a variety of uses including a train station, the Norwalk River, and good road access (routes 7, 57, 102, and 106). However, with the growth in traffic volumes along Route 7, the character of Branchville has changed over the years.

While the area has not developed as a village to the same extent as Ridgefield Center, Branchville does offer a variety of uses, it is the gateway to Ridgefield from the south, and it is an important commuter hub. Branchville has the potential to become a more distinct community focal point. The presence of the train station is a key asset and there is an opportunity to guide businesses and residences to this area to take advantage of public transit service (this concept is often called “Transit Oriented Development”). Encouraging development that has access to public transit and is in a walkable setting can help to reduce the need to drive to work and for basic errands.

The *Branchville Village Plan* was created in 2002 and adopted as part of the POCD (see box for highlights of the Village Plan). The *Branchville Village Plan* is also incorporated into this POCD.

In order to implement the recommendations in the *Branchville Plan*, the Town should consider adopting a special district, such as a Village District, for Branchville. While appropriate densities would need to be determined, the zone could encourage some additional limited density and a mix of uses. It will be important to determine what densities and types of uses would enhance Branchville, yet still retain this area’s small-town feel.

Zoning could either require applicants to demonstrate compliance with the *Village Plan* or provide incentives to encourage compliance. Whichever of these approaches is pursued, flexibility will be important due to individual site constraints (e.g., flood plain, steep slopes, etc.).

Town improvements in Branchville should be guided by the *Village Plan*. In addition, because Route 7 has such a visible impact on the appearance and function of Branchville, the Town should work with the ConnDOT to make improvements that are appropriate for the village. As discussed in Chapter 14, the Town should determine whether sewer service in this area is necessary or desirable. Strategies related to public transit and train station improvements are discussed in Chapter 13.

Similar to Ridgefield Center, the Town should improve parking areas and sidewalks to increase accessibility and should encourage business owners to also improve accessibility, where feasible.

### Branchville Village Plan

The *Branchville Village Plan* provides guidelines for streetscape elements such as sidewalks, signs, street trees, street furnishings and lighting.

The *Village Plan* proposed zoning amendments to either encourage or require buildings and site layout to contribute to a village-like setting by addressing factors such as building height, orientation to the street, mixing uses and parking locations. The Plan illustrates the potential boundaries for a new village zone.

## ENHANCING STRUCTURE IN OTHER AREAS

Through its zoning regulations, Ridgefield has been able to avoid negative elements of community structure (sometimes called “strip” or “sprawl” development) in its commercial areas. Some businesses and sites along Route 35 have incorporated elements of village structure. However, the area remains automobile-oriented and lacks a cohesive identity. This is also the case for the commercial area along Route 7, near the Route 35 intersection.

It is not expected that these areas should incorporate village elements to the same degree as Ridgefield Center and Branchville. But as development and redevelopment occur in these zones, there will be opportunities for enhancements. Commercial property owners should be encouraged to make improvements such as providing pedestrian amenities (sidewalks, benches), pathways connecting adjacent uses, additional landscaping, and making overall site design improvements.

General principles (as suggested by members of the Architectural Advisory Committee) for Danbury Road might include:

- Avoiding parking areas between the building and street.
- Constructing sidewalks.
- Providing appropriate vegetation for aesthetic and screening purposes.
- Encouraging attractive signs.
- Extending the Ridgefield Center streetscape up Route 35.
- Providing other pedestrian amenities.

The Town also plays a role in making some of these improvements (e.g., sidewalks). Potential public improvements are outlined in the *Route 35 Traffic Improvement Plan*.

## GATEWAYS

Gateways provide the primary entrance and first visual impression of the community. Several gateways are of particular concern because they serve as the primary (or key) gateways to Ridgefield. They have higher traffic counts and link to Interstate 84 to the north, Interstate 95 and the Merritt Parkway to the south, or to neighboring New York State.

### Key Gateways to Ridgefield

Road	Gateway From	Average Daily Traffic at Gateway*
Danbury Road (Rt. 7)	Danbury and areas north	27,400
Ethan Allen Highway (Rt. 7)	Wilton and areas south	20,200
South Salem Road (Rt. 35)	New York State	7,700
Wilton Road West (Rt. 33)	Wilton and areas south	6,600
George Washington Highway	Danbury and areas north	4,600
Ridgebury Road	Danbury and areas north	3,600
North Salem Road (Rt. 116)	New York State	3,400
West Mountain Road (Rt. 102)	New York State	2,000

\*Based on 2007 data from ConnDOT. Traffic level is for segment closest to gateway.

The commercial gateways do not convey a discernable message about Ridgefield. For the Route 7 north and south gateways, the appearance of existing or new buildings will likely be the defining character of the gateways. When new development or redevelopment occurs, architectural review can provide guidance on how each building can contribute to the appearance of the gateway. For existing buildings, the Town may wish to explore grant or loan programs to help with façade and landscaping improvements. The South Salem Road Gateway includes a pocket of commercial activity that could be enhanced.

Other gateways are located in residential areas that have a more rural and forested character. Retaining this character is important. Demarcating the gateway with “welcome” signs could enhance these areas.

Photographs of these gateways are shown on the following page.

Ethan Allen Highway (Rt. 7)



Danbury Road (Rt. 7)



South Salem Road (Rt. 35)



Wilton Road West (Rt. 33)





George Washington Highway



Ridgebury / North Ridgebury Road



North Salem Road (Rt. 116)



West Mountain Road (Rt. 102)



### **Protect and Enhance Ridgefield Center**

1. Maintain a mixture of business, civic and residential uses in Ridgefield Center.
2. Continue to discourage an abundance of office uses on the street level.
3. Implement the *Ridgefield Center Study* by:
  - implementing the recommended public improvements as funding permits,
  - ensuring that public improvements are consistent with the Plan, and
  - encouraging or requiring landowners to comply with the Plan when redeveloping or developing properties.
4. Continue to conduct design review for proposed building alterations, redevelopment and new development.
5. Encourage business owners to improve accessibility, where feasible.

### **Promote Branchville as a Focal Point**

6. Implement the public improvements recommended in the *Branchville Village Plan* by:
  - modifying zoning in Branchville (possibly as a Village District) and incorporating the zoning recommendations from the *Village Plan*, and
  - ensuring that public improvements are consistent with the *Village Plan*.
7. When the State undertakes road or public transit improvements, encourage the State to take the *Village Plan* into consideration.

### **Extend Positive Elements of Ridgefield Center to Other Commercial Areas**

8. For Route 35 commercial areas, develop guidelines to encourage pedestrian elements, attractive signs and landscaping, and overall site layout principles.

### **Enhance Key Gateways**

9. For the Route 7 and South Salem Road gateways, encourage landowners to improve the appearance of buildings and properties.
10. Maintain the rural character of the remaining key gateways and consider adding welcoming elements.