



# Memorandum

**TO:** City of Bexley  
**FROM:** Abbie Emison, AICP, NCI  
**SUBJECT:** **Commercial Design Guidelines – Design Framework**  
**DATE:** October 7, 2025

## OVERVIEW

In 2025 the City of Bexley set out to update their Commercial Design Guidelines. Last updated in the early 2000s, the previous guidelines focused on Main Street. This new effort aims to modernize the guidelines to reflect the current conditions of Bexley and expand the guidelines to cover other commercial areas in the City, including Livingston Avenue and North Cassady Avenue.

The process was led by the City, the McKenna and Jones Studio consultant team, and a Steering Committee comprised of local residents and experts.

Throughout the summer and early fall, the City and consultant team conducted several efforts aimed at gathering community and key stakeholder feedback on the guidelines. These efforts included:

- Community Workshop
- Online Survey and Comment Map
- Stakeholder Interviews

From these efforts, the team developed an overarching design framework which applies to the entirety Bexley's commercial areas. These framework elements illustrate the vision that Bexley would like to achieve in its commercial corridors and sets the direction for the guidelines in the specific corridor contexts.

## DESIGN FRAMEWORK ELEMENTS

1. **High Quality Architecture and Materials:** Bexley's commercial corridors should embody the same caliber of design excellence that defines its historic neighborhoods and landmarks. The community's built environment blends old and new, from century-old homes and the art deco Drexel Theater to more modern developments, creating an eclectic yet cohesive character. New buildings and renovations must reflect this high-quality, unique architecture by using durable, authentic materials (such as brick, stone, and wood) and exhibiting attention to detail in craftsmanship. However, no single material palette or formulaic style should dominate; variety in building forms and aesthetics is encouraged so that each corridor retains a distinctive sense of place. Each of Bexley's commercial corridors has its own context and history, and design should respond accordingly with context-sensitive solutions rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. By fostering high-quality, context-sensitive architecture, Bexley can ensure its commercial corridors continue to delight the eye and enrich the community, rather than feeling generic. A mix of architectural styles and forms is welcome. The common thread should be quality and a respect for the existing urban fabric.

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2. **Respect the Pedestrian Experience:** Bexley is a highly walkable and bikeable community, and its commercial areas must prioritize the comfort and safety of those on foot or bicycle. The design of every project should put pedestrians first, reinforcing the City's small-town charm where people stroll between shops, schools, and homes. This means providing generous, well-maintained sidewalks, safe street crossings, and a pleasant streetscape environment that encourages walking, lingering, and cycling. All three corridors should be better linked to each other and to the surrounding residential neighborhoods through inviting pedestrian and bike connections, so that one can seamlessly walk or bike from one corridor to another. The aim is for the corridors to function not as isolated strips but as an interconnected network of people-friendly places.
3. **Bring Activity to the Street Edge:** A vibrant street life is one of the hallmarks of successful commercial corridors. To foster this vibrancy, buildings in Bexley's commercial districts should be oriented toward the street and positioned at the edge of the public right-of-way (with some flexibility for enhanced landscaping, paths, etc.), creating an active, engaging street edge. When structures hug the sidewalk and feature transparent, occupied ground floors, they generate visual interest and social energy that enlivens the public realm. In Bexley, this principle can already be seen in places like Main Street, where newer developments have been built up to the sidewalk with shops and eateries that spill activity outdoors. Such design moves ensure there is always something to see and do along the sidewalk, drawing pedestrians in. New projects (or retrofits of existing buildings) should emulate this by activating the street frontage with doors, windows, displays, and people-oriented uses. Parking lots fronting the street should not be allowed and passive lawns should be considered on a case-by-case basis.
4. **Protect and Enhance the Tree Canopy and Greenery:** One of Bexley's most defining features is its lush tree canopy; the City is renowned for beautiful, tree-lined streets that create a park-like ambiance in its neighborhoods. The commercial corridors should be no exception. These corridors must reflect Bexley's green aesthetic by preserving existing mature trees and incorporating abundant new greenery wherever possible. Street trees and landscaping are not merely decorative; they provide shade for pedestrians, buffer between sidewalk and street, reduce stormwater runoff, and mitigate the urban heat island effect. Each corridor, whether the intimate neighborhood feel of Cassady or the broader avenue of Livingston, must maintain a healthy, thriving tree canopy and generous landscaping that softens the built environment.
5. **Sensitively Incorporate Art:** Art in all its forms should be an integral part of Bexley's commercial corridors, enlivening the streetscape and celebrating the community's creative spirit. Public art, from murals on the sides of buildings, a sculpture in a pocket park, whimsical bike racks, or even temporary pop-up art installations, adds identity and interest to commercial areas. It turns ordinary spaces into engaging destinations, encourages people to linger and explore, and can reflect Bexley's unique culture and history. Wherever possible, new developments or public projects should incorporate art elements, and the City should encourage an ongoing program of art in public places along these corridors. This could range from permanent pieces to rotating exhibits. The presence of art not only creates a more vibrant and humanized environment, but it also offers social and economic benefits. Studies have shown that investments in public art can improve street safety, spur tourism and local business activity, and even reduce social isolation by fostering community pride.



6. **Invite Discovery and Exploration:** Great commercial districts don't just offer transactions, they offer experiences. Bexley's corridors should be places that invite residents and visitors to explore beyond the one store or business they came for, encouraging them to discover new shops, hidden gems, and enjoyable nooks along the way. The design and programming of the corridors should spark curiosity and reward those who walk a little further or look a little closer. This means creating an environment rich with points of interest and a coherent narrative that unfolds as one moves through the space. Rather than a strip people drive to and leave, each corridor becomes more of a journey with landmarks, surprises, and a clear sense that there's always something more around the corner. Strategies to achieve this include providing secondary pedestrian pathways, engaging public spaces, interactive elements, and strong wayfinding to tie everything together.

## NEXT STEPS

Following agreement on the design framework, the consultant team's next step will be to develop a series of detailed design concepts and associated guidelines that put this framework into action across each of Bexley's three commercial corridors. These corridor-specific concepts will provide both visual illustrations and written design guidance to address key elements of the streetscape and built environment. For each corridor, the guidelines will outline strategies for street and sidewalk layouts, connectivity, lighting, landscaping, tree placement, building frontage treatments and massing, street furniture, signage and wayfinding systems, and, where relevant, distinctive gateway or public space enhancements. This approach ensures that the high-level framework is translated into concrete, area-specific design guidance, with each corridor receiving tailored concepts that respect its unique character while maintaining a cohesive, pedestrian-oriented identity citywide. Overall, these guidelines will provide a clear roadmap for implementing Bexley's vision and framework in its commercial districts, enabling property owners, developers, and City officials to make consistent improvements aligned with the community's design goals.