Proposals for increased density are frequently met with resistance because so many of us have witnessed community improvement efforts that impose density increases that disrupt the physical fabric of the surrounding locale. Worse still are those projects that repeat the same homogenous form that allows only one use, for instance, clusters of public housing apartment towers surrounded by a wasteland of open space. Contrast this memory of ugly and unworkable density with the tall residential buildings arrayed along portions of Lake Shore Drive in Chicago. Unlike the homogeneous public housing blocks, the lakefront buildings fit the fabric of their locale, exhibiting a variety of shapes and designs built up over a century. Obtaining attractive and workable density requires careful attention to fit and diversity over time. Oak Park has many older buildings that are functional, beautiful, and deserve preservation. But many other structures lack such qualities and might be removed in time to make way for new construction. Developing a character plan for a geographic area or district provides a framework for making judgments about the scale of the new buildings, as well as how well the building fits the surrounding locale, contributes to visual diversity and improves aesthetic appeal.

The tradition of separating uses in urban and suburban spaces emerged for reasons of public health. For instance, concentrate industrial uses in areas separated from residential areas to reduce the unhealthy and undesirable side effects of industrial activity such as soot, noise, stench and safety hazards. But the idea has expanded greatly since its inception to extend to virtually every type of land use. Separating, segregating and concentrating different uses have fostered the formation of expensive and inefficient clusters linked solely by roadways.

Mixed-use development refers to single buildings that include multiple uses, for instance, retail shops on the first floor, professional offices on the second floor and apartments on the third and fourth floors. The concept also includes the mix of uses within a block, for example, a retail store next to an apartment building that adjoins a restaurant. The two commercial districts already include some mixed use, but the character plans point out ways to alter this mix over time to increase both the quality and quantity of residential, commercial, open space and parking over time.

The mutually reinforcing relationship between residential and commercial growth provides economic justification for mixed-use development. Vibrant commercial areas often attract new residents, and in order for a business to thrive, a sufficient market of local and non-local consumers must exist. An increase in population (due to the new housing units) provides a potentially larger consumer base for any business growth, but the demographic characteristics of the new residents would determine the degree to which they would be likely to patronize local businesses. Developing single-bedroom condominiums, for example, will likely attract smaller and younger households whose consumption patterns will differ from that of large families or seniors. If there is no consistency between the kinds of new commercial and residential development, the different kinds of growth may have no (positive) impact on each other.

The principles of fit and diversity also prove useful in assessing the right mix of use. However, fit in this case refers to judgments about the compatibility of activities. Economically this includes the market demand for each business as well as an assessment of the interactive benefits of each in relation to one another. Diversity refers to the variety of commercial activities needed for a district to pass a threshold of economic viability. The threshold might be measured using the rate of growth in sales, stability of tenure, or other indicators of economic success.