

An Interview with architect/urbanist Dhiru Thadani



As a world-traveling architect with an artist's eye, it took only minutes after arriving in Beaufort for Dhiru Thadani to identify two key aspects of the city's past – and its potential future.

"You don't have very good cell service, and the town is filled with beautiful, historic homes," he said in an interview shortly before presenting his thoughts on growth and planning to 70 or so people at Beaufort City Hall Nov. 10. "If you can bring better and faster technology, young people will want to come here.

"Talented people like to go where talented people are," he continued. "The preference is always a place that has some history. I think you (in Beaufort) have to take advantage of adaptive re-use. Beaufort has beautiful, historic homes and buildings that are very attractive to the younger people if you can provide the technology they require."

His presentation mixed thoughts on growth and planning, economic development and civic infrastructure. Many in the audience were architects and planners – and that's part of the problem, Beaufort Mayor Billy Keyserling said.

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“Some people only know what is and not what could be, as that is the way they were taught and what they aspire to,” he said. “I’m talking about private property, privacy fences, separating yards, private pools, larger lots with chain link fences, locked doors and the like. The challenge is to gain, or regain as the case may be, acceptance of what are actually the old ways of community.

“This means reintroducing the culture of community and individual, and not just idealizing the physical space. This means assuming responsibility for what we do, cleaning our yards so that we do not detract from our neighbors, not parking the boat out on the street or on the front lawn because it is convenient though it is an eyesore for others. The reality is we have to create an environment where young people can do what is most natural – mingle, share, be considerate and celebrate community.”

Thadani’s remarks blend nicely with Keyserling’s and come as Beaufort, Port Royal and the County move to form-based zoning codes. Different from conventional – and usually arbitrary – zoning, form-based codes are designed to address the *relationship* between building facades and the public realm, the form and mass of buildings in relation to one another, and the scale and types of streets and blocks.

Research shows, Thadani said, an interesting paradox for Beaufort’s consideration: Nationally, one of the fastest-growing market segments is older people interested in continuing education offered through local universities. At the same time, young people typically don’t want to – or can’t economically afford to – stay in a smaller town such as Beaufort.

“One of the challenges of economic development is to find what sets your town apart and then make it better,” he said. “With Beaufort, my guess is you have a sizable older population that is reasonably satisfied with things, but not a lot of younger people moving here for jobs... Younger people like to live in the urban setting, they don’t have a connection to the sprawl (away from downtown).”

Continuing on his theme of the value of strong technology infrastructure, from cellular coverage to high speed Internet access and Wi-Fi, Thadani said that the older people participating in continuing education “want to learn more about everything, but they are especially interested in computers and technology. They want to be able to email their grandkids, attach photos. And

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surveys show these retirees prefer to take their classes in a campus or town setting, not in a modified strip-mall.”

Thadani is a consultant, architect, urbanist and educator who has been in practice since 1980, and has worked on projects in Asia, Europe and North and Central America. His experience includes urban design, town planning, architectural design, interior design, landscape design, construction management, graphic design and rendering.

Since its formation in 1993, he has been a charter member of the Congress for the New Urbanism, and was appointed to the Board in 2005. The Carolinas Chapter of CNU brought Thadani to Beaufort. His newest book, ***The Language of Towns & Cities: A Visual Dictionary***, will be released this month.

This interview is part of a series about sustainability and the future of Beaufort. It was written for Lowcountry Weekly by the Congress for the New Urbanism – Carolinas Chapter, as a companion to [this article](#).

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