



Live-Work-Play:

Building Smarter Mixed-Use Environments Through Surveys

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People love living in mixed-use communities, while workers appreciate their convenience and vibrancy. Finding the right mix of tenants and uses is essential, but typically, it is not enough to realize a successful community. Managing and balancing the sometimes conflicting priorities of the many stakeholders is just as important — and challenging!

Humans are fundamentally social creatures who thrive on interaction with other people. They also would rather spend their time “doing things” instead of commuting and thus seek to limit the time it takes to get from one activity to another.

These may not seem like controversial concepts, but for much of the 20th century, planners and developers typically went in a much different direction, segmenting land uses into individual single-purpose districts. People would work in one place, live in another, and shop and dine in a third. These various districts would often be situated far from one another, requiring great time and expense to travel between activities. These distances only grew with suburbanization.

Trends have moved in the opposite direction in recent decades. Successive generations of young Americans wanted to live, work, and play in more functionally integrated neighborhoods. At first, they found these districts in central cities. As they aged, many of these city dwellers wanted more space in which to raise a family, but they also wanted to retain the multi-function features of their neighborhoods.

Thus, the live-work-play developments that took root in inner suburbs across the country were born. These vibrant communities offer residents the walkability and convenience of their old city neighborhoods. Residents appreciate that they can easily access amenities like grocery stores, restaurants, and entertainment without a car. The greater proximity of different land uses facilitates more active and social lifestyles as less time is spent commuting.



Managing Multiple Uses

These communities can take multiple forms. Some are mixed-use developments in one building or a set of adjacent buildings; other projects are spread over many blocks. Some projects are built entirely by one company, such as Celebration, Florida, developed by The Walt Disney Company. More often, projects are master planned by one or more developers, who then sell off development parcels with specific plans, such as The Domain in Austin, Texas. Multiple developers then collaborate on management functions. Other districts involve multiple owners operating under a unified management structure, such as Battery Park City in New York City.

Regardless of the structure, there is ample evidence that well-managed multi-function communities can be more successful than otherwise similar projects in single-use districts. These integrated communities often achieve higher occupancy rates and command higher rents and sales prices compared to traditional single-purpose developments. Tenant demand is strong because they find this living and working environment more desirable, while investors value the more stable performance.



Effective management is crucial to this success but is complicated by the multiplicity of uses and sometimes divergent interests among different tenant types. Managing a community with residents, businesses, and visitors requires balancing the needs of multiple stakeholders, each with their own priorities. Most notably, the different tenant types operate on different schedules, so coordinating events, maintenance, and deliveries can be daunting. Noise levels and disturbances must be managed, especially when residential and commercial spaces are intertwined.



Security and access present additional challenges. Ensuring security for residents, workers, and visitors can be more complex when multiple entry points and access levels exist. In addition, efficiently managing package delivery and logistics can be challenging due to the high volume of deliveries for both residential and commercial spaces.

Understanding What Tenants and Residents Want

Balancing these priorities can be extraordinarily problematic, even under ideal circumstances. In many cases, managers will find that their various types of tenants or users simply have different needs that sometimes conflict with one another. The outdoor seating at a restaurant might be appreciated by diners but annoy nearby office tenants or residents. The parking for one user group may come at the expense of another.

According to the old (and frequently misattributed) business adage, “You can’t manage what you don’t measure.” In this context, managers must first understand what tenants really want before attempting to achieve a mutually satisfying solution for the various parties.

Of course, savvy property managers will bring a foundation of experience from prior situations at similar properties. However, they also realize that no two properties are the same, especially when dealing with complex multi-use communities, so information must be gathered that is specific to the current assignment. Moreover, stakeholder needs and concerns inevitably change over time and must be periodically refreshed.





How best to gain this understanding? One method is to hold regular stakeholder meetings or town halls to discuss community issues, gather feedback, and answer questions. For more sensitive or complex topics, managers can also schedule individual meetings with tenants to discuss their specific needs and concerns.

Then, there are more informal methods of collecting information. Managers can monitor social media platforms for mentions of the community and analyze feedback and reviews. In some situations, the old-fashioned “suggestion box” may encourage tenant input. This can be a literal physical box placed in common areas or an online portal for tenants to submit feedback or suggestions anonymously.

In larger communities, management can establish a formal tenant advisory board to provide ongoing input and feedback on community decisions. These boards can be especially beneficial when attempting to work through contentious or complicated issues.

Surveying Tenants

All of these methods can yield meaningful insights for managers that can assist in property operations and programming. However, one problem with all of them is that the sentiments expressed may not be representative of the broader community, potentially providing a distorted view of overall sentiment. Plus, the input generated, in many cases, can lack the nuance or specificity needed to make them actionable. For these and other reasons, it is essential for managers to go directly to tenants by conducting regular surveys — as part of a comprehensive communication strategy — to gather feedback on various aspects of the community, such as amenities, services, and overall satisfaction.

Different survey questions must be developed for each of the four major stakeholder groups: residential tenants, workers, commercial tenants, and visitors. Each has its own relationship to the broader community, with unique perspectives, concerns, and priorities. While some questions will inevitably overlap across all the groups, others will be exclusive to each group.

In every case, the reason for the survey is the same: Rather than just guessing what matters to property users, managers can attain objective, quantifiable insights via the surveys that can be analyzed to improve property operations, optimize the amenities provided, and tweak space allocations. They enable managers to collect feedback on a wide range of features and prioritize necessary improvements.

Moreover, by conducting these surveys regularly, managers can assess how well their actions reflect the community's will. While online reviews also can identify significant issues, they may not capture the full spectrum of sentiments or preferences. However, they can help identify problems overlooked in the surveys or not fully addressed in management's responses.



Building Community, Retaining Tenants

Beyond providing critical insights into how tenants view the community, surveys can serve another important benefit of helping cultivate goodwill and amity. This objective is essential for multi-use districts where the different stakeholder groups sometimes have conflicting priorities. When deployed as part of a broader communication strategy, surveys can help demonstrate to tenants and other community stakeholders that management values their input — and is working to improve the community for the common good.

Ultimately, the survey insights should help create a more vibrant, welcoming environment that increases the community's market appeal. That encourages residents and workers to spend more time and dollars onsite, which is a win/win for the community and the owners. In turn, this heightened marketability can help reduce turnover and increase tenant retention.

Managing a mixed-use community will always be more challenging than managing the operations of a single property type. However, a regular survey program can be an essential tool to help managers optimize operations and amenities for all stakeholders.

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