Kenton County is located directly across from the City of Cincinnati with the Ohio River as the connection between Ohio and Kentucky. Boone County lies directly to the west, Grant and Pendleton Counties to the south, and Campbell County to the east. Kenton and Campbell Counties are separated by the Licking River. Kenton County covers approximately 162 square miles. There are three major ridges oriented in a southwest/northeast direction that traverse the county. The northern area lies in a lower basin area. Population and development are denser in the northern portions, and become progressively less intense in a southward direction.

Kenton County has four distinct built environments: urban, first-ring suburban, suburban, and rural as shown in Figure 2.1. Policies and regulations that impact the built environment only apply within the jurisdictions that enact those policies. However, development patterns within the built environment do not match geopolitical boundaries. In some cases, an entire city will fall into a specific built environment (Lakeside Park – first-ring suburban). In other cases, a city may have a couple of different built environments (Covington – urban, first-ring, and suburban). For these cities, it is important to note that the policies that affect one built environment (i.e. urban) may not be the best policies for other built environments within the city (i.e. suburban).

Each of these areas contributes differently to the economic wellbeing of the county. Kenton County and the region are in competition for high quality talent and employers. To be economically competitive the county must improve the number of residents with higher education, its business climate (i.e. taxes and regulations), its entrepreneurship and its quality of life. Each of these built environments should be examined closely to understand their contributions to Kenton County and the region, and to find ways to improve upon the assets of each area.

Urban

The urban area of Kenton County lies in a lower basin area, separated from Cincinnati by the Ohio River and from Newport/Campbell County by the Licking River. Parts of the Ohio and Licking Rivers have levies that help control flooding, however some areas are still significantly impacted by flooding events, which tend to occur in isolated areas after heavy rain events. The urban areas tend to be the oldest areas within Kenton County, being the first areas to be settled across the river from Cincinnati. The basin provided level ground for the urban areas to expand outwards until it met the steep hillsides farther south. Urban development then began to emerge on top of the hills and ridges in Northern Kentucky, being the next easiest place to develop. In more recent years, demand for new development has come to some of the last remaining vacant land in the urban areas – to the steep hillsides themselves. The hillsides present spectacular views of downtown Covington and Cincinnati, but they are prone to slippage and landslides.

Urban Kenton County offers the prospect for a metropolitan lifestyle that takes advantage of its proximity to other urban areas in Northern Kentucky and Ohio. The urban areas contain a regional central business district along with many neighborhood
business districts. The strength of the neighborhood districts is directly tied to the health of the entire neighborhood. The urban areas are well connected via mass transit, interstates, and state and local roads to the rest of Kenton County and the entire region. The urban areas in Kenton County are dense mixed-use environments with a highly connected grid street system. The opportunity exists in the urban area to have almost all daily needs (home, work, school, shopping, entertainment, medical services, etc.) located within walking distance or a short vehicle trip. The natural environment is limited to parks and riversides and a few areas of steep elevation. All utilities are readily available, although the age of infrastructure is causing problems within certain neighborhoods.

The residents within urban areas of Kenton County are the most diverse in the county. There are many different ethnic backgrounds, income levels, and religious and political affiliations found in the urban areas. There are more identifiable neighborhoods with geographic boundaries than in the other built environments. This diversity, along with identifiable neighborhoods, brings a strength to the citizens of the urban areas to mobilize resources for the betterment of their communities. The aging housing stock presents a challenge. If it is well maintained, it can be an asset to the entire county. If it is allowed to degrade over time, it can have a cascading effect on the overall quality of the urban areas. Where community organization is strong, these problems have been mostly addressed or averted.

Economic development and redevelopment in the urban area needs to be a top priority. The economy continues to shift from a manufacturing base to a service based economy. The urban areas have already begun adapting to this new reality, and will have to continue to look for ways to adapt and change to meet the demands of its residential and commercial areas in the future.

First-Ring Suburban

The first-ring suburbs are located primarily along a ridge top that begins near the Ohio River in the center of the county and extends southwest towards Boone County. Interstate I-71/75 and Dixie Highway both follow this ridge and play an important role in the lives of residents as the primary access to jobs located in the urban areas and as a focus for commercial development.

The first-ring suburbs have a dual personality, combining aspects from both the urban areas and suburban areas into a unique built environment. First-ring suburbs consist primarily of older residential communities with small houses on small lots. In contrast to this, some infill development has occurred resulting in larger homes on large lots. Many areas of the first ring suburbs are quite walkable; however, a majority of residents still rely on automobiles to access many of their daily needs such as employment or groceries.

Commercial centers are typically service oriented uses. These centers take the form of the smaller historical downtowns, in strip centers along major thoroughfares, or as big box uses located near interstate interchanges. The latter two types of commercial centers often directly compete with the historic downtowns, driving many small businesses under. Within the last 10 years, there has been resurgence in interest in revitalizing or creating the more community and neighborhood oriented downtowns. Many cities have looked at or adopted studies and regulations promoting the traditional downtowns in lieu of
Likewise, community facilities located within the first-ring suburbs can be smaller neighborhood institutions or larger regional institutions. There are many local schools and churches that serve the immediate surrounding neighborhoods. Similarly, there are correspondingly large religious institutions and high schools that draw from the entire region.

Residential and commercial areas within the first-ring suburbs are in constant competition with the urban and suburban areas. As demand ebbs and flows, first-ring suburbs need to adopt measures to prevent the decline of the residential and commercial areas. As with the urban areas, the health of a neighborhood often begins with the quality and upkeep of the homes and businesses in the community.

Suburban

The suburban areas of Kenton County occupy an area in northwest Kenton County along the Ohio River as well as most of the central portion of county. Suburban Kenton County is represented mostly by traditional suburban housing and an auto-oriented lifestyle. This development has a large effect on people’s health, housing choices and affordability, tax base, and form of development. The suburban communities are mostly bedroom communities with a majority of residents commuting to other parts of the region for work. While some suburban communities have a definable historic downtown, the viability of these downtowns has been eroded by the demand and introduction of larger scale retail options.

One of the largest issue facing suburbs is the declining demand for the suburban house. The housing market is likely to undergo significant changes in the coming decades. Baby Boomers are retiring and expected to downsize in housing. Millennials are moving to urban areas and often renting. Generation X wants large suburban homes within walkable communities. This may mean that Kenton County’s housing stock does not meet the needs and desires of our residents in the near future. In the short term, there will still be a demand for suburban housing (see the Housing research report for more details). The larger homes and yard space makes the suburbs a popular choice for raising families. Older generations have indicated a desire to age in place. How long they will be able to maintain their houses and their lifestyle will significantly impact housing demand. Without other housing options, older generations may be forced to move to areas that can better accommodate their needs. Younger generations have shown a preference to urban living and renting longer, or even living in their parents’ houses.

Mobility in the suburbs also presents its own unique issues. The auto-dependent nature of the suburbs often puts a lot of strain on the street networks, causing delays and public expenditures for improvements. While sidewalks and parks do exist in suburban areas and within specific developments, the relative disconnected pattern of development makes walking and biking to destinations (grocery stores, restaurants) not likely. The topography of the suburbs is often a physical hindrance to providing connections within Kenton County.

Additionally, suburban development puts a strain on community finances. New development generates revenues as well as costs. New revenues include property taxes, income taxes, motor vehicle taxes, charges, fines, and fees. Costs include new roads, sewers, police and fire protection, parks, additional teachers, and new schools. As people choose to live...
farther and farther apart, the cost of delivering services becomes greater. More police and fire stations are needed to keep response times reasonable, more streets and sewers need to be maintained, post office workers and school buses have to drive a lot farther to provide service to residents.

**Rural**

The rural areas of Kenton County occupy approximately the southern third of the county, roughly south and east of KY 16. The rural areas also extend up the eastern side of Kenton County extending slightly north of the I-275 loop.

This area of Kenton County offers rural living less than 20 minutes away from the urban core and offers a wide expanse of agricultural lands. The proximity of this rural landscape to the city’s center, provides a true view into the rural culture of the State of Kentucky and an outlet from the more dense and congested development of the more urbanized portions of this region.

Agricultural production occurs on smaller farms operating as a supplement to the owners’ full-time daily income. Traditional farming has given way to more modern endeavors such as agritourism (tourism in which tourists board at farms or in rural villages and experience farming at close hand), egg production, equine livestock, fruit and vegetable production, horticulture production, ornamental production, and vineyards and wine production enterprises.

Development in rural Kenton County is bucolic in its nature – houses spread out with plenty of space, small to moderate sized farming operations, narrow roads, and rolling hills offering vistas of the surrounding countryside. Commercial uses are typically centered around the rural community centers of Piner, Visalia, Morning View, and Kenton.

The rural areas continue to struggle for the provision of up-to-date services such as water, sewer, police and fire protection and cell phone service. One of the challenges in providing these services is the very low-density of the area which influences the cost of providing services.

The second theme – keeping the rural areas rural – is directly impacted by the first theme. While up-to-date services contribute to a better quality of life, they also make the area more attractive for more dense and intense development (wider roads mean safer and easier access, new sewers mean extra capacity for new homes, etc.). There are economic and social pressures on rural Kenton County to develop. Research shows that farm real estate values are increasing while farming net income is decreasing. Increasingly, shifts in lifestyle preferences of younger generations are also causing the number of residents willing to farm the land to dwindle.

Endnotes

1. LaRue, T.C. Multigenerational Demand for Urbanism
2. USA Today 2010
3. Robert Charles Lesser & Co, LLC

Source: Pictometry International Corp