

It's Not About Sprawl Or About Density:  
It's About What Makes Us Safe, Secure, Healthy And Prosperous

*The battle lines are drawn: on one side the greenies and urbanists, the other, builders and NIMBY's. Both think they have the answer to our urban ills. But since they both start from their desired solutions, communities end up deadlocked and stuck in business as usual. In a talk recently with Olympia Washington's Vision2Action on how to implement the Sustainable Thurston County Plan, I began by telling a story and reminding them of the values everyone shares and are at the root of shaping our common futures.*

I would like to begin by telling you a story. It is my story and it would be unremarkable except it has become somewhat of a cliché out of an old TV show, like Mayberry RFD perhaps. But it is a true story.

I didn't grow up on a farm, although my mother did. We lived on a quiet, tree-lined street in a small capitol city in the Midwest. Big leafy elms formed a tunnel over the boulevard to downtown. We had a ravine that began in our backyard and then ran to a creek and then a river where we would skinny dip on summer days. Until the dinner bell rang and we would descend like wild tribes to our respective homes.



Our house was modest, three bedrooms and a bath for our family of seven. We three boys bunked in one room and zealously guarded our allotted closet space and dresser drawers. My dad added a shower and toilet in the basement to ease the lineup in the morning. Our street was full of kids, with most families having lots of children—it was the 60s. It was always easy to get up a baseball game.

My dad drove to work in the family car but the trip was only ten minutes from our house on SW 56<sup>th</sup> to the steel mill where he was an engineer. He would be home by 5 every day when dinner was served. Except for once a month when he'd be late on a Friday because of a "Safety Committee" meeting after work. It was only years later when we found a photo of him and other guys shooting pool under elk and moose heads that he confessed that the "Safety meetings" were really a night out with the guys.

My mom would feed us breakfast and shoo us off to school or out the door to play in the summer. After doing the chores we kids couldn't do, she would walk down the street to gather with other mothers over coffee or Kool-Aid. Until she would have to

go home to greet us on our return from school and to get dinner ready for my Dad's arrival.

My elementary school was two doors down with a playground of asphalt and gravel that kept us occupied most days until dark. My junior high school was about 3 blocks away. High school just a ten minute bike ride--and most kids rode bikes-- at least until they were able to afford a junker car. For fun there was Greenwood Park, with ice-skating in the winter, swimming in the summer, lots of woods to run around in and an Art Museum that drew me in when I got older.

We never questioned our independence as kids—traffic was light, sidewalks went everywhere and there were always kids out on the street wherever you went. It is both amazing and sad to hear people today talk about such communities—urban communities—disparagingly as “too dense” “crowded” and “dirty.”

Since today is advertised as a talk about density, I would guess that the number of housing units per acre was about ten on my street, with much higher numbers along the main road to town which had lots of 3 and 4 story, handsome brick apartments. In addition, our big families packed a lot of people into a pretty small area.

All these people made for a lively and safe place to live where we knew our neighbors well. And all these people supported lots of businesses. Just down the hill were grocery stores and restaurants—Dunkin Donuts was my favorite stop for an apple fritter after completing my morning paper route. We would sometimes go out as a family for a 15¢ McDonald hamburger and nickel fries.

Then my dad got transferred. To Pittsburgh. A dirty old town.

Like many families, where we were going to live was really a question about perceptions of school quality, and in those days that meant staying away from inner city schools in the throes of desegregation. Our family plunked down in a newer subdivision with streets named after the orchard trees that were cut down to build the houses. We still lived in a three bedroom house and we three boys shared a room but the house was on a street with no sidewalks fronting an old farm-to-market road with narrow lanes, deep ditches and no place to walk or bike out of traffic. There was one park in the town, a 7-11 next to the high school where everyone hung out on Friday nights and an incredible sense of isolation compared to the run-of-the-town we were used to. My older brother could drive and could get together with friends easily. Our mother had to become the chauffeur for us younger kids because our schoolmates all lived farther away than we could walk safely. I was the only one who rode a bike to school and was regularly yelled at, was pushed off the road and once was hit by a full beer can. Neither I nor any of my siblings ever went back to that town after leaving for college, joining 500,000 other ex-Pittsburgh residents who left in the last 20 years.

*The discussion about sprawl versus density is really about what kind of places we want to call home, and what strategies and tools do we need to create the conditions that allow us to flourish. And about the barriers we've erected in the last half-century that make it so difficult to smoothly transition to a different future. Why is it that a story like mine, that used to be such a common experience, is now either mocked as nostalgia or seen as a impossible throwback to a past that can never happen today?*

**What is it that we want?** We all want a place to live:

That provides economic security, with meaningful, dependable employment for all, so we can provide for our families;

Where our kids are safe and independent;

Where they enjoy growing up and will want to stay or return to as adults;

That supports strong ties among residents, both through formal means, like PTA or citizen participation in government but also through informal means like meeting up in the park or the pub;

That is healthy for us, having clean air and water, places to play and enjoy nature;

That we can be proud of and brag to our friends about;

In short, we all want a community where we can live a good life.

Is there a formula? What can we learn from other places—their successes and failures—that can help us plan a different future?

For Better or Worse, over the last 50 years we have mostly got what we wanted and planned for:

- Our own personal parks (though mowing that lawn gets less and less fun!)
- Freedom to do what we want with our “castles” (though sometimes when I’m stuck painting or plumbing instead of going out on the weekend I question my decision to be a homeowner)
- Mobility and convenience (until too many people moved out of town and had to drive to work and now the roads are jammed)
- Quiet (until the leaf blowers and lawnmowers rev up at 7 on Saturday)
- Economic booms (and busts—the farther you live from the city center, the greater the drop in value of your home every time the economy falters)
- Our piece of the pie (well, maybe not. Many people lost everything when their homes were less than their mortgages.)

The revolution in transportation—fueled by cheap gas and cheap cars as well as government subsidies for new roads, sewers and schools—revolutionized how we lived, whether we wanted it or not. We got all this, and now wonder whether it was a good thing. We fled to the suburbs to find security, safety, peace and quiet and a less chaotic, more familiar community. Did we find it?

### **Here’s what the research tells us:**

The greatest threat to our children’s lives is the car. The more time our kids spend in a motor vehicle the greater the risk is. Car crashes are the number one avoidable cause of death of people between the ages of 2 and 34. Sightline Institute found that it is actually more dangerous for a teenage male to live in the suburbs, due to the risk of dying in a car crash, than to live in an inner city ghetto.

We are isolated from our neighbors--by distance, by traffic filled roads, by disconnected development patterns and lack of sidewalks and other public spaces. We often don’t know much more about our neighbors than what car they drive. Our kids suffer even more because they depend on us to drive them around. When both parents are work, they are stuck.

This isolation plays out in the political world. It is so much easier to see our differences than our similarities when we don’t interact on a regular, informal basis with each other. If you know the people you are arguing with, you are much more likely to see their point of view.

Suburbs are sold as good places to raise our kids. But are they healthier? Already we know that more car time means more risk to our kids. What are some other effects?

Let me ask you: did you walk or bike to school when you were a kid? How many of your kids do? In the 1970s, over 70% of children walked or biked to school in America. Today that number is under 2%. This has incredible negative effect on your child’s health.

How about **economically**? Hasn’t all this growth and development made us richer?

Lets look at this on two levels: the family (household) and society.

Children spend up to 3 hours a day in a school bus—with poor air quality and no seatbelts or in the back of a car. When they get home, they hole up in their bedroom or media room with an abundance of electronic diversionary devices that exercise only their thumbs. As a child, I marveled that Sears Roebuck had “husky” jeans—all my friends and family wore slim. Now almost 30% of schoolchildren are overweight and diabetes has become a childhood disease. These children will face hard futures health wise as well as huge healthcare bills.

Urban development and housing patterns have contributed to the steady decline in our standard of living over the last 40 years. Increasing housing prices as houses became investments rather than homes, exacerbated by the additional cost of owning multiple cars because sprawl development destroys viable alternatives for getting to work, shopping or school. In the early 1900s, before the automobile became ubiquitous, the average household spent about 4% of its income on transportation.

Today, the average family spends 20% of its household income on transportation. Many poorer families spend much more, with transportation often costing more than housing. About 50% of the average family's income goes to paying for shelter and mobility. When one is unable to live in a walkable, convenient neighborhood, their quality of life and standard of living markedly declines. Driven by the "drive till you qualify" nature of our housing industry, many lower income people now live in even more isolated, distant locations. Indeed, in places where urban living and urban neighborhoods are resurgent, the low-income people who used to be able to live car free lives are being displaced to the outer exurbs by rising housing costs.

Ouch!

It seems that this revolution, like most revolutions that promise to re-make society for the better, didn't deliver on its promises.

A landscape of subdivisions, located far from workplaces, strung together by endless miles of ugly, anonymous strip development has given us anemic communities, fiscally stressed families and unhealthy people.

This is why "sprawl" has become a curse word in some circles.

This kind of development also is a *poor public investment*, costing much more to serve per unit of housing or job created. Local governments are fiscally stressed as they struggle to maintain far-flung infrastructure like sewer and water pipes, roads and bridges and even schools. The American Society of Engineers gives the current condition of US Infrastructure a D- ranking because governments continue to build new infrastructure to serve new development and let existing infrastructure crumble. Up-front costs are often hidden in a mish-mash of development fees, cross subsidies from property taxes of current residents and businesses and grants from other governments.

Yet, there is plenty of reason to hope for a better future.

Chris Nelson of the University of Utah forecasts that over 50% of housing, office buildings and shops will be new or redeveloped over the next 20 years. Think of that: we have to opportunity to shape how half of our community will look like and function during the next 20 years. In the time of two generations—40 years—almost everything we see in our cities and towns today will be gone or redeveloped.

What do you want to see in its place? What is worth keeping? What would make sense to replace and with what?

Remember what people really want: It's not a certain design of house or size of yard—it's prosperity, safety, health, nature, and community. What can we do to design a place that gives people what they really want?

Here are a few strategies that work:

1. **Listen to people and give them what they want** even if they don't know they want it yet. An example: in Tigard, a suburb of Portland that is growing fast and was seeing lots of anger and fear from its residents, the city ran a process that asked them what they wanted. Here's what the people said: they like their community just how it is (mostly single family with a large commercial area that attracts lots of commuter traffic) BUT they wanted a Trader Joe's grocery to shop at and a Starbucks to congregate at. Trader Joe's market analysis requires at least 3000 people to live within a mile of any store location before they would consider putting a store there. Only about 1000 were living around their preferred site. Armed with this information, the community did a planning process where they supported rezoning some land along main streets and in commercial areas nearby for multi-family, mixed use development which gave them the numbers to attract a Trader Joes as well as giving workers options to live closer to work and commute less.
2. **Stop fighting the market and subsidizing losers.** Much of our current zoning rules were developed to address threats that no longer exist: dirty industry, unsafe housing like tenements, and the like. Restrictions like separating housing and jobs, requiring lots of car parking, large lot sizes, over-zoning for single family, segregating multi-family off away from centers of activities, putting schools on huge sites far away from where people live... all of these raise the cost of living and how much we drive while forcing the housing industry to produce a product with a declining demand. Both older and younger households have turned away from the detached, single family home and are looking for more convenient, smaller, more affordable housing choices whether to own or rent. And they want to live where there is activity, restaurants, shops that you can walk to.
3. **Recognize who your future market is.** With large numbers of boomers reaching retirement age soon, they will be looking for new housing options and their replacements, young, educated, hip will want to live in an exciting, lively urban environment. Will they live and commute from somewhere more exciting? Or will you capture their drive and energy by creating places they will want to live and commit to?
4. **Don't touch single-family neighborhoods.** They will resist all change and will fight to the death to prevent it. Respect this and value what they offer to the City. Instead, aggressively rezone main streets and strip commercial to

- mixed use, allowing housing and businesses in the same area and buildings up to 4-6 stories tall. Lower the speeds on these streets and reduce the number of lanes and lane widths so these areas can become pedestrian magnets instead of car-dominated deserts.
5. **Forget number 4.** Allow accessory dwelling units—mother in law apartments—by right in all zones, especially single -family neighborhoods. Being able to convert part of a large house into a rental, or rebuild the garage, has many positive benefits without affecting the character of the neighborhood. It will help with housing affordability for new families, help elderly stay in their neighborhoods, either through downsizing in their own home or by raising their income, and provide more people and tax revenue to utilize and support public services.
  6. **Build good public spaces.** Parks, plazas, libraries, and schools can be the spark to leverage private investment and public support for new forms of development. Think carefully how you spend scarce public resources and make sure that they contribute to a more accessible, healthier and vibrant community. Especially schools.

The question isn't sprawl or density. Its what kind of community do you want to create? You have the opportunity and the knowledge to build a place you and your children will be proud of. A place that has housing choices that are affordable to everyone, where a nine year old can walk to the park or to the store to buy a popsicle, by themselves, where they won't be by themselves because all their friends will be going with them, that encourages walking and cycling because people are healthier, more connected and productive if they use their bodies daily, that uses public dollars wisely by avoiding expensive expansions and reinvesting in keeping what we have in good condition, that integrates home, work, school and people into a dynamic, engaged and engaging community.