

Smart Growth Trends

by Edward T. McMahon

Ignoring trends is not smart, especially when those trends affect the bottom line. This article discusses five important “smart growth” trends, each of which represents a hopeful shift from the sprawling, segregated land use pattern that has predominated since the end of World War II.

1. Suburban Town Centers

Take a drive into the Virginia suburbs outside of Washington, D.C. and you will see three projects — Reston Town Center, Cascades Village Center, and Kentlands Town Center — that exemplify one of the most hopeful new smart growth trends: a shift from endless strip development to compact, highly defined suburban town centers.

In the early 1990s, American LIVES and Intercommunication Inc. conducted several nationwide surveys to determine what features and amenities homebuyers would most like in a new community.¹ One surprise was that people said they preferred “town centers” with a village green surrounded by shops and civic buildings to commercial strip malls strung out along major highways. As a result, developers, aided by savvy local governments and proponents of “new urbanism,” are starting to build town centers again.

All over the country failed strip malls are being recast as walkable town centers with a mix of stores, offices, housing, and civic buildings. Schaumburg, Illinois; Boca Raton, Florida; and Rockville, Maryland, for example, have all demolished failed malls to construct mixed use town centers. On the West Coast, the Village Galleria in La Jolla, California incorporates apartments above retail shops into a new town center. Similarly, Bainbridge Island, Washington is now constructing thirty-four apartments atop a 20,000 square foot retail complex on a downtown corner.

These projects are just the tip of the

iceberg. Town centers are becoming one of the hottest trends in both retailing and community development. In the Washington, D.C. area alone, there are more than twenty town center developments under construction or in advanced stages of planning. Ironically, small town main streets have long been touted for their mix of uses, walkability, and charm, but until recently walkable town centers were treated as anachronisms rather than as models for how we could build in the future. This outmoded view is now changing.



New downtown housing. Portsmouth, Virginia.

2. Green Space as a Residential Amenity

The 1980s saw a proliferation of gated developments in which a golf course served as the focal point for the community’s design and image. Golf courses are, of course, important recreational and visual amenities, and in most cases create highly profitable lot premiums. However, golf courses are expensive to construct and only appeal to a narrow segment of the home buying public.

When American LIVES asked homebuyers what features they most wanted in

a new home community, golf courses ranked thirtieth. By contrast having lots of “natural open space” ranked third. Similarly, a survey by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* of homeowners in golf course developments in southeastern Pennsylvania found that only about twenty percent of the owners actually played golf. They said they bought there because they liked the view across the fairway.

These findings suggest that open space is a far important feature in community planning than golf courses, and that homebuyers are willing to pay premium prices to live in communities with green space.

[Editor’s Note: For more on the “value added” aspects of open space in residential developments, see page 9 of this issue.]

3. Open Space Systems

Almost lost in the 1998 election coverage was mention of the more than 200 state and local open space initiatives voters approved. These initiatives, which will provide nearly \$7 billion for farmland preservation, parkland acquisition, and open space protection, reflect another smart growth trend: the development of open space systems.

New Jersey voters, for example, endorsed a constitutional amendment that commits \$1 billion to preserving open space and constructing a network of trails and greenways. Similarly, voters in Alabama, Florida, Michigan, Minnesota, Oregon, and Rhode Island approved hundreds of millions of dollars for statewide open space protection programs. Localities as diverse as Fairfax County, Virginia; Douglas County, Colorado; and Cape Cod, Massachusetts, also endorsed new funding for community open space protection projects.

Perhaps more important than all the new money is the fact that all levels of government are beginning to recognize the economic, social, and environmental

benefits of “open space systems.” Thirty of the nation’s fifty largest metropolitan areas have developed or are in the process of developing regional greenspace plans, as have hundreds of smaller communities.

Just as regions need to upgrade and expand their *grey* infrastructure (i.e., roads, transit lines, sewers), so too, they need to upgrade and expand their *green* infrastructure (i.e., parks, greenways, natural areas). When communities have a road map delineating which land should be preserved, it becomes easier to facilitate development in areas where it is most appropriate. Also, given the growing opposition to sprawl, many officials see open space preservation as a politically acceptable way to shape urban form.

4. Downtown Housing

A 1998 survey conducted by the Brookings Institution and the Fannie Mae Foundation found that one of the fastest growing segments of the nation’s housing market is downtown housing.² For example, Houston expects its downtown population to quadruple by 2010. Cleveland expects its to triple. Denver, Memphis, and Seattle all anticipate doubling the number of downtown residents in the next ten years.

The growth in downtown housing is not restricted to large cities. Many smaller cities and towns are also seeing a growing market for downtown housing. Asheville, North Carolina; Portsmouth, Virginia; Burlington, Vermont; Dayton, Ohio; Bangor, Maine; and Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin are just a few examples.

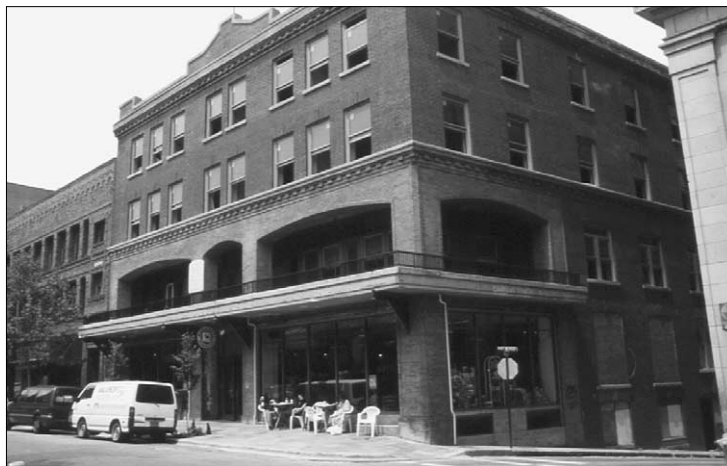
So what accounts for the growing demand for downtown housing?

- *Access.* Downtowns usually have the largest concentration of jobs in a metropolitan region, and downtown housing makes walking to work an attractive option. Downtowns also have the most public transportation facilities. Even when downtown residents have to drive, reverse commuting is an attractive option.

- *Amenities.* Virtually every downtown has amenities not typically found in

suburban neighborhoods — museums, waterfront parks, colleges, theatres, unique views, and interesting architecture. While the quality of city schools remains a concern for families with school age children, only one-third of American households fall in this category.

- *Pedestrian Friendly Environment.* Older downtowns are walkable. They evolved during a period when development was compact, high density, and pedestrian friendly. Senior citizens, in particular, like the option of being able to walk to church, the post office, or shopping. Downtown housing also gives them access to public transportation. A growing number of cities have converted abandoned hotels, old schools, and vacant industrial buildings into housing for seniors and others.



Office Building renovated for housing. Asheville, North Carolina.

5. Cooperation Instead of Confrontation

A few years ago cooperation between environmentalists and developers was unheard of. Not anymore. Across the country, developers and environmentalists are working together to promote smart growth. Both recognize that *Nimbyism* is the biggest obstacle to new development, no matter how well conceived.

Growth is going to occur. The real questions for most communities are: where should development take place, and what form should it take.

Developers and environmentalists are starting to cooperate to change local laws and policies that impede smart growth. Both realize that land use regulations need to be more flexible to allow for innova-

tion. Street standards, parking lot design, stormwater management, wetlands regulation, open space protection, mixed use zoning, and tree preservation are all areas where builders and environmentalists are finding common ground.

This cooperative approach has led to a series of smart growth conferences and roundtables. It has also led to the development of new consensus-based design guidelines such as *Better Site Design: A Handbook for Changing Development Rules in Your Community*.³ This publication sets out twenty-two model development principles endorsed by interests as diverse as traffic engineers, planners, homebuilders, fire department administrators, and environmental organizations.

While builders, environmentalists, and planning commissioners will never see “eye-to-eye” on everything, it is certainly true that all these groups have much in common. Establishing non-adversarial mechanisms for identifying common interests is one planning trend that benefits us all. ♦

1 The American LIVES, Inc. and Intercommunication, Inc. joint surveys of homebuyers are reported on by Brooke Warrick and Toni Alexander (the respective presidents of the two market research firms) in the February 1997 issue of *Urban Land*, published by the Urban Land Institute.

2 The Brookings Institution / Fannie Mae survey, “A Rise in Downtown Living,” is available on the Web at: www.brook.edu/ES/urban/centralproduct.htm. Or contact the Brookings Institution at: 202-797-6000

3 Published by the Center for Watershed Protection, 8391 Main St., Ellicott City, Maryland. To order, phone: 410-461-8323.

Edward McMahon is a land use planner, attorney, and director of The Conservation Fund’s “American Greenways Program.” He is former president of Scenic America, a national non-profit organization devoted to protecting America’s scenic landscapes. McMahon’s column appears in each issue of the PCJ.

