

Baltimore Sun

Columbia dodged development bullet with proximity to D.C., expert says

Though planned town defied many principles of successful planning, he says, it has thrived

By Janene Holzberg, Special to The Baltimore Sun

9:33 p.m. EDT, May 26, 2011

If Washington had been located 20 miles farther south of Columbia, the master-planned community would have failed, as land-use strategist Chris Leinberger tells it.

"America's City," as it was called in its earliest years, violates nearly every successful planning model across the country by being located southwest of its nearest metropolitan area — the city of Baltimore — instead of north of it, where the upper middle class prefers to live, he says.

Having a second metro area nearby — and that city being our nation's capital, no less — is what saved Columbia from what Leinberger considers a certain collapse, as it managed to skim growth from both Baltimore and Washington.

These are some of the background concepts that Leinberger will discuss Wednesday as he reviews how Howard County's planned community will stack up against 21st-century development trends.

Leinberger focused on walkability and establishing a sense of place in his 2008 book "The Option of Urbanism," an emphasis that made him a unanimous choice among organizers to address the future of 40-something Columbia as it stands on the edge of redevelopment, according to Jane Dembner, the Columbia Association's director of community planning.

He is a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution, a nonprofit public policy organization in Washington, as well as a University of Michigan professor, founding partner of a new urbanism and transit-oriented development and consulting firm, and president of a real estate advocacy organization.

His talk, the third in a series sponsored by the CA, is co-hosted by the [Howard Hughes](#) Corp., Columbia's developer.

"Columbia has remained an attractive place for people to live, but in order to continue to compete we need to enhance our connectivity," Dembner said, adding that the issue goes much further than the city's 100 miles of pathways. "We need to get around, be healthy and interact with our fellow human beings more — something driving a car can't accomplish."

Despite what he views as [James Rouse's](#) potentially fatal geographical blunder, Leinberger said Columbia is doing better than any other master-planned community because of another thing it purposely didn't do: concentrate poverty in one area.

"Jim and Patty Rouse believed in social equity and advocated for affordable housing," he said, calling Rouse, "one of the finest developers ever" and a major influence on his career. "If concentrated poverty had been allowed in Columbia above 20 or 30 percent, then all the negative social indicators would go haywire."

Instead, Columbia has been an example of "doing well while doing good," he said, referring to its simultaneous financial and social success by most barometers.

"In the middle of the flight to the suburbs, there was Jim on the cover of Time saying, 'Cities are fun,'" he said, referring to a 1981 issue of the national magazine that carried a lead story about the planned community.

"But we have vastly overproduced driveable suburban [communities] and that puts the idea that humans prefer to be with people [who are] just like us into the zoning code and turns it into the law of the land," he said, a measure which he believes promotes racism.

A planned community, by definition, locates every zoning use in its own separate corner of the city, he said, and Columbia is the epitome of that ill-advised philosophy on the East Coast, "but it's doing it as well as it can be done."

The question is whether Columbia can be revamped into a mixed-use community that's walkable, he said. And if residents must live downtown or drive to the walkable parts of the city, that defeats the whole purpose.

"What you have now is arrested development; you're in the 'well-done sprawl' phase," he said. "Columbia put a Band-Aid on driveable suburban from a physiological and sociological point-of-view because people moved there consciously to live in a socially inclusive place.

"The good news is that Columbia is doing well-done sprawl better than any other place in the country," but that's also the bad news, he said.

"The question is whether you tear down or repurpose the suburban model," he said. "The beauty of walkable urbanism is it just gets better as you build more."

Beyond walkability within the city is the goal of getting beyond Columbia to the two metro areas it's sandwiched between without driving a car.

"The next big question is, 'What about rail transit?'" he said. Rail is a big challenge to developers because they will be asked to help pay for it, he noted, but nonetheless it must be part of the redevelopment discussion and planning.

Leinberger's longtime friend, Parris N. Glendening, who served as Maryland's governor from 1995 to 2003, called Leinberger "one of the premier minds in financing smart growth" and said Wednesday's meeting will not only be interesting, but an important conversation for residents to hear.

"Columbia is moving in the right direction with its new densities, but I've felt for a very long time that it's absolutely essential to have transit links" that connect Columbia by rail to Washington and Baltimore, said Glendening, president of Smart Growth America's Leadership Institute.

Homeowners in Columbia Town Center will see their property values rise between 40 percent and 100 percent by letting a transit corridor be built as quickly as possible, Leinberger said.

"And having that suburban splendor while being able to walk to urbanism is the best of both worlds," he said. "We are looking for special places for the ages, not the flavor of the month. What we built 40 years earlier needs to be modified to fit the newer generation, and we are learning that it's absolutely achievable here in Columbia."

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