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The new urbanism is coming our way

Orley Hood

ohood@clarionledger.com

Quality of life in modern America used to mean getting as far from the urban center as possible - away from crime, congestion, failing schools, dysfunctional government, crumbling infrastructure.

Many of us - including city planners - didn't know it at the time, but we were trading one inconvenience for another.

To do anything - grocery shop, get a haircut, go to soccer practice and school and church and the library - you have to drive.

All across the country, people traded in sidewalks for highways, lanes and shops for boulevards and strip malls. Mixed use downtowns, where you could live, work and play, gave way to vast suburban tracts where going to the office meant a road trip.

Now the pendulum swings back. People want their sidewalks. They want to live where they work and work where they live and they don't want to crank the car every time they go out to dinner or catch a movie or a t-ball game.

The suburbs, as best they can, are going urban.

Let's go walking

Christopher B. Leinberger, real estate developer and visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution, recently released a report on the walkability values in the 30 largest metropolitan areas in the U.S.

Washington is tops. Boston's second. San Francisco's third. Tampa is 30th.

The deal goes something like this: People are looking for lifestyle, for community, for convenience. They want to be able to go to dinner, to an exercise club, to schools. They want to ditch the car.

Here in the metro area, baby steps are being taken. There's a new town, Lost Rabbit, being developed in Madison County. Flowood is creating a town center from scratch behind Dogwood Festival Market. Condos up. Shops and offices down. A corner saloon. A bistro. A pizza joint.

It's 5 p.m. You take the elevator down from your office, walk out the front door, stroll a couple of blocks, take a right and you're home.

Anyone want to go down to the club for a swim or a game of tennis? We could go for burgers afterward. Or Mom and Dad could sip something cool, then nibble on a piece of ahi tuna at the white tablecloth restaurant around the corner.

All without cranking a car, without buying a \$3 - and soon to be \$4 - gallon of gasoline.

Engine driven

That's always been one of the problems with the suburbs, where every activity has to be planned because transportation is always an issue.

There's a community, sure, but no hub, no nexus, no soul.

Just highways and off-ramps and vast parking lots.

Seaside in Florida, near Destin, set the example. Houses, set close together, on streets that aren't too long, close to the bookstore and the school, the beach and bar, the cafes and restaurants, the shops and art galleries.

Walk or bike. You have neighbors you see every day without having to look through a windshield.

In Mississippi, think Oxford. It's coming to Flowood. To Town Colony and Lost Rabbit and in other developments where the automobile is not the center of attention. People are.