

# Raleigh Independent Weekly

## Imagine Raleigh without sprawl



18 MAR 2009 • by **Bob Geary**, rjgeary (at) mac (dot) com

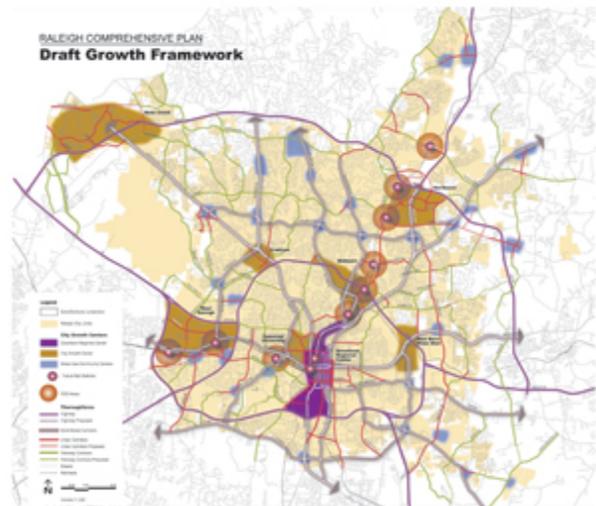
In the run-up to this week's public hearing on Raleigh's draft comprehensive plan, the advice to city leaders from a stream of visiting experts has been remarkably unified. Success, experts say, depends on taking city life "back to the future."

The era of suburban sprawl is ending, these planners maintain, not simply because of high gas prices, but because it is fundamentally unsustainable. As Christopher Leinberger, a fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., put it in a recent talk, the more "drivable suburban" neighborhoods a city allows, the lower the quality of life becomes for everyone living in them. The fastest-growing market now, said Leinberger, a developer, is for "walkable urban" places: the kind Raleigh doesn't have, yet needs to create, that are modeled on what cities were before cars took them over.

Such places are far more complicated to build and manage than the suburbs, Leinberger said. But done right, these areas improve as they grow. They have more cultural diversity and housing options—and with public transit, the chance for people to save money by owning fewer cars, or none. If Raleigh fails to create them, Leinberger warned, "You will be left in the 20th century."

The question for Raleigh is where these walkable urban places should be.

Leinberger's analysis and the other experts' jibes with the basic goal of the comprehensive plan to curb sprawl and guide development into designated "growth centers." Yet it also raises the



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Map courtesy City of Raleigh

issue of whether the plan identifies too many centers—including some in places that can never be urban.

In addition to the downtown regional center, the plan shows seven other "city growth" areas. Some of the seven are tangential to a string of distinct, "transit-oriented development" zones along a planned commuter-rail line; some are along the beltline highways (Interstate 440 and Interstate 540) and nowhere near the transit corridor.

The plan invites the redevelopment of shopping centers and strip malls along these and other major roads, such as Capital Boulevard, as mixed-used urban spaces. But to hear the planners tell it, such redevelopments are rare.

Adding housing to a strip mall doesn't make it urban, they say. And adding more housing to suburban places may undermine the potential of other locations, including those on the rail-transit corridor, to grow.

However, Raleigh Planning Director Mitch Silver, who will present a revised draft of the comprehensive plan at a joint public hearing of the City Council and Planning Commission Thursday, doesn't think the highway and rail-transit locations conflict. He says Raleigh will grow fast enough over the 20-year span of the comprehensive plan for both to develop successfully.

Silver argues that given the number of strip malls in Raleigh, the city must encourage their redevelopment, using "very robust" bus service and a new zoning code for highway spaces.

But Silver is aware of the question, and posed it himself last month to a trio of planners attending the annual urban design conference sponsored by the N.C. State University College of Design.

"How do we create a public [urban] realm in a suburban realm" dominated by oversized thoroughfares and skinny or missing sidewalks? he asked.

Simon Atkinson, a professor of planning at the University of Texas School of Architecture, shook his head. "The suburb was designed not to have a public realm." The whole point of suburbs, Atkinson added, is privacy.

In contrast, the walkable urban places that the planners describe are typically located on a grid of city streets, not highway thoroughfares. They feature sidewalk storefronts, public plazas and parks that help to offset the mass of high-density housing developments. They usually offer—

because of inclusionary zoning rules—a mix of housing types, including affordable units, middle-income and upscale housing, often in four-story or smaller buildings. "Inclusionary zoning is a no-brainer," Leinberger said.

Most such places are accessible by transit or by car, bicycle and on foot, said James Charlier, a Boulder, Colo., transportation planner who spoke at the conference. Once people arrive, though, there are "pedestrian districts" where people can hang out, have fun, shop and live—while the cars are parked.

Charlier calls them pedestrian districts to distinguish the real pedestrian places from the new fad of "pedestrian-friendly" roadways that, despite cosmetic changes, continue to function as "traffic sewers" hostile to walkers.

The only way to turn a highway mall into an urban place is to tear it down, start over on a street grid and connect it to the adjoining neighborhoods, he said.

At the same conference, Mindy Fullilove, professor of clinical psychology at Columbia University Medical Center in New York, said true urbanism is characterized by a sense of connectedness that allows people of diverse backgrounds and incomes to nonetheless feel that they live in the same community and share an identity with the same "great place."

At a time of rapid upheaval in the world, Fullilove said, people yearn for the kind of stability and belonging that existed—before urban renewal cut through it—in the Hill district of Pittsburgh where her parents grew up. It was a relatively poor, predominantly African-American community of row houses, storefronts and apartments. There were no high-rises, nothing fancy. But it was a place where people believed "whatever problems you have ... you can get together and solve them."

Studies show that in such neighborhoods, the incidence of mental illness even for the poorest people is less than it is for the well-off who live in suburban isolation, Fullilove said. Like Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven," she added, "you can lock your doors, but the problems get in anyway."

Leinberger said his study of metropolitan Washington, D.C., and Atlanta suggests that a city should have no more than a half-dozen walkable urban places per million people. Some of these will be downtown, some in inner-ring neighborhoods, and some in the suburbs, but what they have in common is their location at rail-transit stops, not on highways.

By his math, Raleigh should attempt to create two or three such places, in addition to downtown, by 2030, when the comprehensive plan anticipates the city will be home to 600,000 people.

These places should be on the rail or a streetcar corridor, which, he said, are permanent and attract investors, developers and upscale buyers. "I have never seen a dollar of real estate investment generated by a bus stop," Leinberger said.