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## Speaker: Pendulum brings people, prosperity back to downtown KC

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The keynote speaker for the Downtown Council of Kansas City's [annual luncheon](#) had good news for the roughly 1,000 downtown stakeholders and supporters in the audience Friday at the Kansas City Convention Center's Grand Ballroom.

In the future, downtown Kansas City and adjacent neighborhoods like the Crossroads Arts District "will be the major economic drivers of metro Kansas City," said [Christopher Leinberger](#), a research professor at [George Washington University](#) and a nonresident senior fellow at the [Brookings Institution](#).

Leinberger, who also is a founding partner with [Arcadia Land Co.](#), a New Urbanism and transit-oriented development firm, said the pendulum has swung back from an emphasis on drivable suburban development to walkable urban environments during the past 15 years, and Kansas City, which has the nation's sixth-fastest-growing downtown, is now at the forefront of that shift.

"We know who's to blame for this; it's the damn kids," Leinberger said, referring to millennials seeking urban places to live, work and play.

But beyond that, there have been other culprits for the nation's societal preference swings, Leinberger pointed out.

The author of "The Option of Urbanism: Investing in a New American Dream," Leinberger noted in that 2010 book that government policies had tilted the playing field toward the drivable suburb during the previous 60 years. That shift, fueled by the auto and oil industries, contributed to urban decay, increased greenhouse emissions and rising incidence of obesity and asthma, Leinberger contends.

Another culprit behind the shift: television, which Leinberger said has often been "a reflection of how we want to live."

In 1957, the year Kansas City ripped out the third-largest streetcar system in America, he said, Lucy and Ricky Ricardo moved from Manhattan to suburban Connecticut.

During Friday's luncheon, Leinberger played part of the relevant episode of "I Love Lucy" for the audience. Then he played a snippet from a 1991 episode of "Seinfeld," one of several programs of that era that



ROB ROBERTS | KCBJ

Christopher Leinberger, a research professor, developer and Brookings Institution fellow, talked about the many reasons why downtown Kansas City is "back in the game" during his keynote address to the Downtown Council on Friday.

depicted young professionals living in walkable urban places.

In the 1950s, Leinberger said, only 25 percent of Americans actually lived in the suburbs. But by emphasizing suburban living, shows like "I Love Lucy," "Leave it to Beaver" and many others helped move the pendulum in that direction.

One of the factors driving it back the other direction, he said, has been the retiring of the baby boomers, who have been downsizing since becoming empty nesters. In addition, Leinberger said, young people are waiting longer to start filling their nests. While 50 percent of American households had children in the 1950s, 75 percent of today's households are childless, Leinberger said, and that number will grow to 86 percent during the next 20 years.

Downtown, with its walkability and public transit options, also has become increasingly attractive due to the expense of owning and maintaining cars. In the suburbs, Leinberger said, auto-related costs represent 25 percent of household budgets, while that percentage drops to 9 percent in walkable urban areas.

Building on such advantages, as downtown Kansas City has been doing, creates "an upward spiral of value creation," he said.

Leinberger said Kansas City leaders had been "brilliant" in laying out the starter phase of the city's new streetcar system, which links four of the city's six largest walkable urban destinations. Launched last year, the \$100 million, 2.2-mile streetcar line attracted 1 million riders in its first 180 days and helped spur \$1.5 billion in new development, Douglas Stockman, the Downtown Council's outgoing board chairman said Friday.

"Transportation drives development," Leinberger said, calling it the most important of the 16 infrastructure categories and the reason why there are secretaries of transportation but no secretaries of sewers.

"But one does not build transportation systems with the goal moving people," he said, adding that the goal is economic development.

In the latter half of the last century, Kansas City drove suburban development by paving the way to the metro's status as No. 1 in the nation for freeway miles per capita.

In the future, however, city leaders will be well-advised to continue looking at eliminating unneeded stretches of the highway, such as the north side of the downtown loop, and extending the streetcar system, Leinberger said.

Other key goals, he said, should include bringing the UMKC Conservatory of Music and Dance to the proposed location next to the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts and continuing to repopulate Downtown and adjacent areas with residential projects.

Downtown Kansas City leaders also should start looking for private-sector partners to help finance catalytic growth, such as Quicken Loans is bringing to downtown Detroit and Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen has sparked in Seattle.

Such private investment for the public good is nothing new, Leinberger said, noting that the streetcar lines Kansas City enjoyed 100 years ago "were all built by the private sector."

