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Stroll to the Future: Walkable Neighborhoods are Next for Dallas

Welcome to Seinfeld America, a fine place to take a walk that's coming soon to Dallas

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"We have a policy that says we will not expand the access into our city by even one lane of additional automobile traffic."

Unfortunately for me, life is not always a conspiracy. Sometimes it's just how people think. Which can change. Last week I attended a day-long seminar put on by City Manager Mary Suhm at which I do believe I saw light bulbs appearing over the heads of the Dallas City Council and mayor.

Maybe they were just hungry.

But even better than the possible light bulbs, the news at this particular tent revival was that Dallas is going to change for the better, whether Dallas City Hall gets it or not.

This is all about the new kind of living together that experts are calling "walkable community." On the one hand, it's not that complex a concept. It's a community. You walk.

On the other hand, it's a 180 degree turn from suburbs, gated communities, segregation, stratification, fortification—all the things we thought were the American dream.

By walkable urban neighborhood, they mean Seinfeld America, a place where people live in buildings that are anywhere from four to 15 stories, with a coffee shop for Jerry, Elaine and George on the corner, entertainment places right out there on the block. Maybe your work is even in the neighborhood. And everywhere you need to go is an easy walk.

My own term for it is no-DWI neighborhoods. You can go to work, come home, go out, get hammered, maybe get dumped by your girlfriend or boyfriend, maybe find a new one, maybe have something really terrible happen like lose your cell phone, find it again in a lovely sidewalk planter, and the whole time there's never a chance of a DWI. You are DWI-proof, because you are not in a car.

You have outwitted the law! You are brilliant!

Suhm, with money from a private group, brought in a panel of experts from around the United States and Canada to tell the mayor and council what's really known about this stuff. One of the speakers, Christopher B. Leinberger, has been here before. Larry Beasley, a developer who is also professor of planning at the University of British Columbia and retired director of planning for the city of Vancouver, was here for the first time.

Armed with solid numbers showing the trend in this country and Canada, Leinberger, Beasley and two other experts told the council that human beings will come back into this city and all cities in droves in the decades ahead, no matter what city councils do. They will come searching for many of the things city planners and elected officials have always believed were bad and undesirable—presumed barriers to growth.

"We say that congestion is our friend," Beasley said. He also told the council, "Regulation is our friend."

Congestion our friend? Regulation our friend? You could see the looks. I know what everybody on the council except Angela Hunt was thinking. "If congestion and regulation are our friends, who are our enemies?"

Hunt gets it. First of all, she represents East Dallas, downtown and Uptown, where all of the coolest things are happening in the city—towers pushing up from the soil, people squeezing together, awnings blooming over sidewalks, tables sprouting. It's a life where people from all walks get out and walk and talk together and relish spontaneity and variety.

In the second place, Hunt completed a major fellowship in Europe last year with some of the world's brightest thinkers in urban planning. Much of what she was hearing at the seminar she

already knew. But I swear I saw signs that others on the council were getting it, too, as the day wore on.

Suhm scheduled this thing to happen just as the Dallas City Council comes to a crucially important vote on zoning—a decision that will influence the shape and nature of the city for the foreseeable future. So far the council debate on so-called "form-based zoning" has been full of sound, fury and signifying.

But at this deal set up by Suhm, the invited experts expressed certain core concepts that seemed to illuminate the ground for everyone. That doesn't mean Dallas will do a single thing these guys recommended, but at least the city council will have a better idea what it's deciding and why.

Judging by body language and facial expressions of the council members, I think some of what the experts had to say at the seminar sounded like blasphemy spoken in a foreign tongue by strangers standing on their heads. I could barely keep a smirk off my face when Beasley told them about Vancouver's secret to success.

"We have been very lucky in our city," he said. "We do not have any freeways."

Beat. Council staring with round eyes. When does he get to lucky part?

"We do not have freeways that take people in and out of the core city. And that's because of some very courageous action in the early 1970s by the councils of the day, who said, 'We're just not going to go that way.'"

Council still round-eyed. Must be build-up to joke.

"But we have had to be vigilant on this matter ever since," Beasley said. "We have a policy that says we will not expand the access into our city by even one lane of additional automobile traffic."

He went on to explain that making it harder for people to get in and out of the city in cars has helped the city persuade them not to get out at all. Instead, Vancouver has persuaded large numbers of people to live in the city, play in the city and stay in the city.

"In fact, we say that congestion is our friend, because congestion in this kind of arrangement can be used to cause people to think about their housing choices and come to a housing choice that is closer to where they work. And it is also a way to calm those streets and make those streets safer for all the people out of their cars who are also using the same streets."

Ironies fell on ironies. The private group that put up half the money to pay for this message was Trinity Trust, whose primary reason for being was to push construction of a high-speed, limited access, toll road right in front of the Trinity River, where others had hoped to build a waterfront for downtown instead, right down the middle of what many had hoped would be a great urban park.

Irony mountain. The experts spoke of the importance of involving professional planners and architects in zoning decisions. Many in the audience were Dallas planners and architects. During the debate on the Trinity River toll road, most of our planners and architects in Dallas tarted themselves up as experts of the night and worked the side of the street where the money was. They appeared at political rallies and pronounced with straight faces that a new highway right through downtown, right down the river bank, was really cool planning.

A girl's gotta live.

The most powerful message, I thought, came from Leinberger—a message not fraught with irony or ambiguity but plain as a freight train. Cities like Dallas are already looking at significant pent-up demand for walkable neighborhoods.

"In the '50s and '60s," he said, "50 percent of all households in this country had children living in the household." Today, he said, it's a third.

"When you look at the large growth we are expecting in the future, only 12 percent of the net new households created in this country will have children living in them. Eighty-eight percent will be singles and couples."

In addition to the fewer-kids factor, Leinberger says people just won't accept the one dimensional quality of '50s living.

"The market wants more choice," he said.

Not everybody thinks single-family homes are boring, but many people do. He cited a study that finds American society divided in thirds—a third still wedded to the single-family home, a third looking for walkable urban life and a third undecided.

If you split the undecideds evenly between single-family and walkable, you've got a 50/50 split in the market. But Leinberger said Dallas probably has less than 5 percent of its viable residential property in walkable areas.

The effect of that disparity—50 percent of the populace trying to fit itself into less than 5 percent of the property—is a classic supply-and-demand imbalance that has driven up the value of land in walkable areas. Leinberger, a developer but also a professor at the University of Michigan, cited his own studies which have found that land values are between 40 percent and 200 percent higher in walkable urban areas as compared with drivable suburban residential areas.

Part of what this means is that it's coming. The Dallas City Council can get it right or goof it up, but people are going to vote with their feet. Those feet are going to drive up values and drive up excitement and style in inner city areas like East Dallas, pretty much no matter what.

But there are two key elements—two light bulbs—that would allow the council to get it right in terms of the decisions it must make next month on "form-based" zoning, which is about creating new walkable areas.

First, the walkable areas have to be big enough. They need to have a certain critical mass in order to happen. But second, they have to be impermeable. There has to be a corral around them.

To create a walkable area, you have to take away all the traditional zoning rules that protect single-use neighborhoods. A walkable area needs to be sort of an anything-goes zone.

But the only way you will ever get voters and property-owners in the surrounding single-family areas to go along with that is by assuring them that their own areas are absolutely protected. They have to know that none of this crazy mixed-use gobbledygook is going to happen on their turf, ever.

Only when you can build a Maginot line around the mixed-use walkable area will voters in the nearby single-family area let you do it. Then they might say, "Go for it. We'll walk over there, lose our cell phones and not get DWIs, too."

It's these issues that the council must resolve. Thanks to Suhm's little seminar, they will be much better equipped to make those decisions.

In a way, I could interpret all of this enlightenment as a conspiracy after all. Against me. Let me chew on that.