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The Rise of the Walkable City

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The sun may finally be setting on America's suburban empire. Home designers are calling for the [death of the McMansion](#). Planners are listing the economic, health, and environmental [drawbacks of sprawl](#). Policy analysts are highlighting the importance of [major metropolitan regions](#). Now Patrick Doherty and Christopher Leinberger, writing in the [Washington Monthly](#), are proposing an antidote to the suburban illness—the walkable city:

The burgeoning demand for homes in walkable communities has the potential to reshape the American landscape and rejuvenate its economy as profoundly as the wave of suburbanization after World War II did. If anything, today's opportunity is larger.

As [Matthew Yglesias notes](#) in his discussion of the piece, population growth and a preference for city-living by younger generations have created a new wave of “walkable transit-accessible neighborhoods.” Doherty and Leinberger use Salt Lake City as a prime example. The Utah capital recently rejected plans for suburban expansion in favor of dense, walkable, urban neighborhoods situated near stops on a light rail system, TRAX. While TRAX initially had its critics, the transit system became such a big hit that voters twice approved tax hikes to expand it.

But such transformations remain the exception rather than the rule, Doherty and Leinberger write, because federal and state governments continue to subsidize suburbanization by favoring highway projects over transit systems:

Today, even though consumer preferences have changed, most of the old rules and subsidies remain in place. For instance, federal transportation funding formulas, combined with the old-

school thinking of many state departments of transportation, continue to favor the building of new roads and widening of highways—infrastructure that supports low-density, car-dependent development—over public transit systems that are the foundation for most compact, walkable neighborhoods.

Congress will have the chance to reconsider these subsidies next year when it reevaluates the highway bill. Doherty and Leinberger suggest ending the bias toward highway construction and issuing infrastructure grants “based on their economic, environmental, and social equity impacts.” The recent TIGER II grants have taken a step in the right direction—already irking auto enthusiasts by [deemphasizing road projects](#).

But accomplishing these policy changes might be a problem if Republicans gain as many seats as predicted. As Doherty and Leinberger point out, the conservative base lives “predominantly in exurban and rural America” and views proposals for balanced urban transportation as a Democratic agenda. If saving [high-speed rail](#) isn’t enough to get urban infrastructuralists to the polls next week, maybe the rise of the walkable city is.